The Best Angle is a Love Triangle

newtboot465

Rivals (TV 2024) / Rutshire Chronicles - Jilly Cooper

Complete

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Summary

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Description:

This fic answers all the questions you never had about the Rutshire universe, including:

What if there was a love triangle?

What if we got more of Bas Baddingham, the best himbo in all of Rutshire?

Picks up after the end of 1x08 and that kitchen kiss.

Immediately after Rupert and Taggie kiss in the kitchen, a distraught Cameron appears at the Priory, reeling from her fight with Tony. In an attempt to take care of her and protect the Venturer bid, a conflicted Rupert moves Cameron into Penscombe.

Meanwhile, Bas Baddingham begins to take a more active interest in Taggie O'Hara. After all, his best friend has clearly broken her heart, and it's just the decent thing to do.

When Bas needs a last-minute date to the Hunt Ball, he calls the Priory. Taggie, heartbroken and pining for Rupert, is bullied by Caitlin into going with Bas. After all, if the rest of Rutshire can have stupid, silly fun, why shouldn't she?

What could possibly go wrong?

This is a fic where everyone experiences some growth (and a lot of angst), and we ride an ever-escalating rollercoaster of emotion.

Spoilers for the television show season 1 and the Jilly Cooper book.

1. The Aftermath

The night Venturer was awarded the chance to submit a bid, Bas had stood with everyone else around the tele, watching the coverage of their success, not noticing that Taggie and Rupert had left the group. Bas was also the first (and only) person to hear the frantic banging on the front door. He opened the door to a panicked Cameron who was both incoherent and sporting the early stages of a black eye.

"Christ, Cameron! What's happened!?"

Cameron couldn't form words and was visibly shaking, her teeth chattering together as if she was freezing, despite the temperate evening weather. A single teardrop rolled down her cheek, like an omen of the emotional dam that was about to break. "I-I-I need him."

"I'll go find him, just come in" he said, touching a hand to Cameron's shoulders to guide her in the door. She snapped back from him as if he had slapped her. *Shit. Something was very wrong*. The only 'him' Bas could think of was Rupert. Leaving Cameron at the door, he turned and walked back inside, scanning the group still gathered around the tele. No Rupert. *Fuck*. Bas walked around the corner, walking into the kitchen. He immediately noticed Rupert and Taggie at the other end of the room, standing less than a metre apart, their fists clenched at their sides, staring each other down, both with heaving bosoms and an air of desperation about them. Such desperation, in fact, that neither of them heard Bas enter the room. Rupert lifted a hand, as if to touch Taggie's face, and took a step toward her. Bas rolled his eyes. *Christ, who needs Four Men Went to Mow—here was the best drama in Cotchester. If only they could just fuck it out and not be such bloody freaks.* Bas, remembering the stricken Cameron at the front door with a shiner barked, "RUPERT."

Rupert and Taggie both started and spun around to face him. They both looked as stricken as Cameron. While Rupert wouldn't meet his eyes, Taggie did, a deep crimson flush overtaking her from the roots of her auburn hair to the neckline of her light blue dress. They both instinctively retreated to opposite sides of the room. Long practiced in ignoring awkwardness, Bas acted as if he had seen nothing.

"Rupert, Cameron is here. Something is very wrong. You need to come now."

At the mention of Cameron's name, Taggie flinched. Bas watched her deep blush transition to a corpse-like pallor, as if all the blood that rushed to her head had suddenly evaporated.

As if on cue, Cameron materialized in the doorway beside him. He noticed now that the sleeve of her suit jacket was ripped and she had a split lip. Her entire body was shaking now. Once her eyes found Rupert, the dam burst—the single tear became despondent sobs. Rupert rushed forward and caught her before she fell to the floor. Even Taggie had recovered. Given Cameron's usual cool demeanor, this display disturbed all of them.

"Cameron, what the fuck has happened?" Rupert asked, pressing her head into his shoulder. Taggie remained in her corner of the kitchen, looking as if she was slowly being strangled. Or was about to be sick.

“Tony’s dead! I killed Tony!” Cameron began to hyperventilate.

“FUCK.” Rupert and Bas yelled in unison.

Rupert pulled out a chair and settled Cameron into it. He squatted down in front of her, his brown eyes stared into hers like lasers, as if the power of his will could settle her. His tone was cold, detached, urgent. “I need you to tell me everything. Right now.”

In between gasping, shuddering sobs, her makeup running down her face, Cameron recounted that she and Tony had fought in the Corinium offices, clarifying that Tony had split her lip and given her the black eye. When he had come at her again, she hit him with the Malaga award. When he laid on the ground, not moving, eyes fluttering, bleeding from his head, she had panicked and run—right to the Priory. To Rupert. In this moment, all of Cameron’s walls were down, and it was painfully obvious to everyone in that kitchen that she *loved* Rupert and that he was the only one who could console her. Rupert held Cameron, as she continued to sob.

“Bas, call 999 and tell them there’s been an accident in the Corinium offices and they need to send an ambulance. Urgently,” Rupert barked.

Rupert then put his index finger under Cameron’s chin and pulled her face up to look him in the eye. “And you, you’re coming home with me. You can’t be alone, and you can’t go back to that apartment. It’s not safe there.”

Adrenaline coursing through his veins, Bas jumped up and went right to the phone. Less than 5 minutes had elapsed since he had first opened the door for Cameron, and the rest of the Venturer group was still gathered around the tele. Somehow, they hadn’t noticed Cameron ghost-walking her way to the kitchen after Bas. They did, however, notice Bas pick up the phone, dial 999, and tell the operator to send an ambulance to Corinium as quickly as possible.

The excited chatter instantly stopped. After placing the receiver back in its cradle, Bas gestured to the kitchen with his head. Rupert, with a more composed Cameron in his arms, slowly made his way out. Rupert and Bas made eye contact and Bas nodded. Rupert and Cameron continued out of the house, presumably back to Penscombe, and Bas synopsized Cameron’s version of events for the rest of the group. Exclamations of “Fuck” and ‘Jesus Christ’ and “What the hell will we do now” abounded. The group left the television room and went back to the parlor next to the door, frantically brainstorming what was coming next.

Bas left them and went back to the kitchen.

Taggie was standing alone, still in the back corner of the kitchen, seemingly frozen to the spot, gripping the edge of the counter with white knuckles, all the blood gone from her face. Bas didn’t say anything. He just walked around the table and held his arms out as he approached her. She was shaking, just as badly as Cameron. She tried to muster a weak smile, but once he was within a meter of her, her face fell, and she walked to him, wrapping her arms around him and accepting his embrace, sobbing into his shirt-front.

Caitlin materialized in the kitchen’s side entrance, quietly taking it all in. Bas and Caitlin’s eyes met. Unnaturally somber, Caitlin slunk back into the shadows. He felt a pang for Taggie. Despite all Taggie did for others, no one else, except perhaps her sister, really saw or really

cared about her. He supposed Rupert did, in his own stunted, ass-backward way. *The poor kid* , he thought, as he held her and stroked her long auburn hair.

"But she's not you."

The slow, hot feeling of his hands, hesitant, soft, sliding around her waist. The feeling of his breath on the back of her neck. The hoarse whisper of his voice. Taggie didn't know if she wanted to sob with relief, scream with joy, or melt into the floorboards. Over the past few weeks, her heart had felt like her kitchen washing rag, endlessly rung out. And here, finally, was what she had craved, ached for. Rupert, alone with her, in her kitchen. Telling her she was special, more special than *Cameron* . Admitting he craved her, too. *Touching her* .

She remembered her mother's words about putting others first so often that it becomes second nature. *I will not push myself down forever. I will not let this hesitation, this suppression become second nature. I will take what I want.* She turned in Rupert's hands. It felt like a moment out of time when they came together and their lips met. It was fluid; jumbled; gentle; frantic; clumsy. *It was perfect.* The taste of tobacco, of whiskey, on his mouth. The rock-solid firmness of his chest under his starched shirt. How soft the curls of his dark hair felt at the nape of his neck where her fingers curled in. The feeling of pressing her forehead to his, breathing hot and fast against each others' faces. When their lips and bodies parted, Rupert's arms shook as he released her. Taggie took a step back, her heart hammering in her ears. She felt like she was floating. She had waited months for this moment. She wanted to drink him in. He was beautiful, he was *hers.* His eyes frantically searched her face.

"Tag," he whispered, stepping forward, lifting his hands to embrace her again, as if it was insufferable to have any sort of distance between them. Taggie's blood elated felt like it was singing in her veins.

"RUPERT!"

Taggie nearly jumped out of her skin and spun to face the voice. It was Bas, standing in the entrance to the kitchen. She and Rupert both shrunk from each other. Taggie felt herself blush crimson, like a schoolgirl caught being naughty. She hated the feeling.

"Rupert, Cameron is here, and she is frantic to see you. Something is very wrong. You need to come now."

Taggie's head jerked back at the mention of Cameron's name. The soft, pastel pocket of paradise that had been the last three minutes evaporated with the mention of that name. Cameron. Rupert. No place for her. Taggie was flooded with a green wave of jealousy for Cameron and resentment for Bas.

However, those feelings were complicated when Cameron appeared beside Bas in the entryway to the kitchen. She was a complete mess. Taggie felt a pang of empathy as she watched Cameron shiver and chatter her teeth, clearly having a panic attack. As the following minutes unfolded—Cameron collapsing into broken sobs, Rupert rushing to her aid, Cameron's assertion she had killed Tony after he attacked her for refusing to give up Rupert, for *insisting she would marry Rupert* , *Rupert insisting she move in* with him, Taggie never

moved a muscle. She felt like her body was made of glass. She heard and saw, but none of it seemed to sink in. After what felt like seconds and also hours, the kitchen was empty.

Taggie released a shuddering sigh and realized she had been holding her breath since Cameron had first collapsed into Rupert's arms. Slowly, the words and events of the past minutes began to sink in—Rupert with his arms around Cameron, Rupert soothing Cameron. Rupert telling Cameron she had to move in with him and couldn't be alone. Rupert never looking back at her once. Taggie felt like she must have hallucinated their tender, urgent exchange, their kiss. But the rising lump in her throat, and the stabbing pain in her chest assured her otherwise. It *had* happened, but it had also changed nothing, it meant nothing. Within minutes, Rupert had left with Cameron, without so much as a glance or a goodbye. She felt, knew, that he was more lost to her than ever.

But despite everything, Taggie knew that she loved him. She loved him so much that the memory of his face, that night, it felt like drowning. And she didn't even merit a goodbye. She remembered his words that had made her heart soar just moments earlier, "But she's not you."

When Rupert said them, she had been elated, felt seen, special. But now, "She's not you" felt like a death knell—a condemnation of all of Taggie's shortcomings, an assurance that she would never be anything other than a stolen kiss in a kitchen, the subject of covert glances across a crowded room. *She wasn't Cameron.* She didn't matter. But she loved him anyway. Her chest felt like it was being crushed, and she felt hot tears of shame and grief well in her eyes. She was filled with self-loathing for how weak she was. In that moment, she was grateful that she seemed to be invisible to everyone, as it meant she could be alone in the kitchen with her despair, clinging to the counter as an anchor in the storm. She had always borne her shame and grief in private. This secret would be no different.

Then Bas appeared in the doorway, frowning, his dark eyes soft and full of concern. He had clearly come back to check on her. It was such a small gesture, but receiving such a basic kindness was so rare for Taggie that it only made her feel more ashamed. She met his eyes as he walked towards her and tried to muster a smile to put him at ease, to assure him, like she did everyone, that she was fine, there was no cause for concern, she didn't need help. She didn't need *anything* . She was Taggie. Taggie who gave, who never asked, never received. But as he approached her, her smile died on her lips. Trying to move the corners of her mouth shattered what little self-control she had left, and when Bas opened his arms to her, she practically leapt into them. She was too crushed to care about her pride. It felt good to be held, even if just for a moment. As Bas stroked her hair, she thought bitterly, *Look at me, taking what I want* .

She never noticed Caitlin in the side entrance, and Caitlin never mentioned it.

The weeks after that night passed in a grey haze for Taggie. She knew that Caitlin knew she was despondent, and to Caitlin's credit, she never asked her for details. Instead, she was extra diligent about helping cook and clean up after herself. She also went out of her way to record to tape a range of new recipes Taggie had wanted to try from a French cookbook, even making a trip to the Cotchester library to collect new recipe books. Taggie noticed all of these

small gestures, and while she didn't explicitly acknowledge them, she loved her sister for making them.

When the ambulance arrived at Corinium studios that night, not only was Tony Baddingham not dead, but he was sitting up on the floor, with his suit jacket pressed to his head. He insisted it was "an accident," and he had tripped over his own feet and hit his head on the desk while alone in the office. He was stitched, evaluated for a concussion and sent home. Of course, Cameron's appearance in the Priory and her story fueled all sorts of local rumors. Tony, to his credit, stuck to his story and never pressed charges against Cameron, wanting to avoid putting any of that nastiness on the record and damaging Corinium's chances at securing the franchise. Cameron remained holed up in Penscombe and also never pressed charges against Tony. Taggie, for her part, couldn't have cared less if Tony lived or died. While Tony's aggression had driven Cameron definitively into Rupert's arms, home, and bed, Taggie guessed it was only a matter of time anyway. Tony's beastly actions had only made her face the futility of her feelings for Rupert sooner rather than later. For that, she guessed she should be grateful.

The Venturer crew was often at the Priory in the following weeks, planning their full application. Rupert and Cameron always came together. Rupert never once glanced in her direction. It was as if she didn't exist. *She's not you* , Taggie recalled bitterly. Indeed, Cameron was *not* Taggie. And every time the two of them came to the Priory, she couldn't help but think how well-suited they were—sleek, powerful, well-spoken, driven, beautiful. It hurt to look at the two of them together—like looking directly at the sun. Taggie withdrew and retreated to the kitchen. It felt like her fortress—where she understood the rules, where she felt confident and powerful. As an unforeseen benefit of her Venturer canvassing and general word of mouth, she had an endless list (and waitlist) of catering jobs, and she threw herself into that work. She welcomed the distraction. And as with most things in her life, her withdrawal from the Venturer application process was never commented on, leaving her alone with her grief and her catering jobs. Sometimes it was convenient to be invisible.

During each meeting, however, while Taggie and Caitiln hid away in the kitchen, Bas would inevitably find his way into the kitchen, briefly making some small talk and sampling Taggie's latest experiment. Upon tasting said experiment, he always moaned a bit too enthusiastically for Taggie's taste. But he was always charming, flippant, clearly trying to make her laugh and raise her spirits. While it always hung in the air between them, neither mentioned that night in the kitchen where she had soaked his shirt with her tears. She cringed just thinking about it, and she was grateful he never mentioned it. Like Caitlin's sudden interest in chores and recording recipes, Taggie recognized both his visits to the Priory kitchen and his compliments for the intentional kindness they were, and she appreciated it.

When one afternoon, Bas again asked her to consider working for him in the Bar Sinister kitchen, replacing "Lechie Louie," his current chef who was both an unpleasant person and relatively incompetent, Taggie shyly declined, seeing Bas's offer as based in pity for her pathetic situation.

Bas took her decline in stride, "I'll keep at you until you say yes. I know you would make an excellent head chef." Pausing on his way out of the kitchen, he added with a wink, "I think you would quite enjoy having someone under you."

Taggie choked on her tea, and Caitlin howled with glee. With a grin, Bas simply donned his sunglasses and strutted out of the kitchen, back to the rest of the Venturer group. Taggie and Caitlin locked eyes and immediately burst into laughter. It felt good to laugh.

It was a typical late Friday morning in the O'Hara household. With Maud gone, Declan had thrown himself into working on his Yeats biography, emptying whiskey bottles at a faster pace than he filled pages. He spent most days holed up in his office. Sometimes he would descend to the kitchen for a whiskey refill or a meal. More often, Taggie would leave trays with full meals outside the office door. While it was clear that Declan felt her absence keenly, for Taggie and Caitlin, Maud's absence interrupted little in the household. HOwever, Taggie felt her father's grief keenly and gave him his space. He, however, was fully unaware of her grief. However, even if he did come down from his cloister, she doubted he would pay enough attention to notice how often she sighed and spent minutes and minutes staring out the window, at nothing at all. Or furiously attempting ever more complex and new recipes as an effort to distract herself. Despite how frustrating it was to try to navigate the text on recipes, she relished the challenge of a new dish. Feeling her way through the textures, the flavors, the balance, the colors, smells—it felt natural. She felt confident and powerful, skilled. She needed that. It was one of the few things that added color and feeling back into her shattered world, now that Rupert and Cameron had embarked on their cohabitated bliss across the valley. She felt like a tragic heroine in one of her mother's terrible romance novels with how despondent and listless she felt.

Caitlin, for her part, was alarmed at Taggie's state. Some fun, and a fling in particular, would do her a world of good. For Christ's sake, Taggie was 20 years old and beautiful—in no world should she wilt on account of unrequited love for a profligate, middle-aged MP. Given her opinions on the matter, on this Friday afternoon, Caitlin was particularly pleased that *she* was the one to answer the phone when it rang.

"Hello, Priory?."

"Is that Caitlin? I find myself in a bind and I need your sister's help. Is she there?"

Caitlin instantly recognized Bas's voice. She remembered the night when she had witnessed him holding her sobbing sister in the kitchen. "Oh? Yes, do tell me more. I am managing all of her affairs at present."

Caitlin shot Taggie a wide grin. Taggie, now realizing she was the subject of the conversation, rolled her eyes and gave a weak smile.

Bas continued, "I'm in a dreadful bind. The Hunt Ball is tonight, and my date has just cancelled on me. I was hoping your sister would agree to go with me. While I'm never afraid to go stag, it's always more fun with good company." He paused, then added, "And I think your sister could use a night out."

Caitlin gleefully spun in a circle, twisting herself in the phone cord, "She would LOVE to. And I *will* convince her, but in return, I need you to promise to take me, too," Caitlin sing-songed into the receiver.

“Done. I’ll be there in an hour with all the necessary accoutrements. One last question—what size are the two of you?”

Caitlin told him and promptly dropped the receiver back into its cradle, a self-satisfied smirk on her face. “We’re going out tonight!”

Taggie narrowed her eyes at her sister, immediately wary of what form of “going out” would elicit such a self-satisfied air in her sister. Taggie said nothing but made a circular motion with her hands, silently asking her sister to elaborate.

“You’re going to the Hunt Ball with Basil Baddingham,” Caitlin chirped.

As Taggie started to protest, Caitiln held her hands up primly, “And you can’t say no, because you need to get out and stop moping. Also, he has no one else to go with, and he’s nice. AND most importantly, if you go, Bas will also take me, and I can’t stand being cooped up here anymore. I need this. So you’re going to do this for both of us.”

Taggie released her breath in an exasperated groan and fell back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. Rupert and Cameron were guaranteed to be there, and she would have to have their domestic bliss rubbed in her nose again.

“Cait—you know as well as I do that we both have nothing to wear. Mummy made sure of that when she took all of my best clothes with her back to London. I know you want us to have fun, but do you think me waltzing in looking like a frumpy clown with bad lipstick is going to be good for morale?”

“Bas said he would be over in an hour to take care of everything! You heard me give him our sizes. Accept it Tag—Cinderella is going to the ball.” Caitlin wiggled her eyebrows at this last bit, causing Taggie to roll her eyes and laugh.

It was true—it would be nice to get out of the Priory. Despite her nerves, she also felt it would be good to see Rupert and Cameron out and as a couple, outside of Venturer meetings. It would make it more real. She needed to just accept it—how happy and well-suited they were. It would tear her heart into pieces, but she *needed* to do it. She *would* conquer this. She had gotten over Ralphie and she could get over Rupert. The thought pained her, but she shook her head, as if to exorcise it. “Well, *you* can explain this to Daddy.”

“My pleasure!”

Caitlin sauntered upstairs and poked her head into Declan’s study. “Taggie and I are going to the Hunt Ball tonight. Bas is taking us both.”

Declan, already advanced in his cups, nodded and waved his hand without looking up from his typewriter. “Yes, yes. Fine.”

“Also, I’m pregnant and quitting school and Taggie has run away.”

“Great, love. Your da just needs to work on finishing these pages. Have a nice night. Ask Tag if she can set some supper out by the door for me.”

Caitlin rolled her eyes. Negligent parents took all the fun out of rebellion.

True to his word, Bas arrived exactly an hour after Caitlin had hung up the phone. He also didn’t arrive alone. At his side was a very sleek, petite woman with chestnut hair who looked

to be in her 30s, aggressively chewing gum. She flashed Caitlin and Taggie a bright smile when they opened the front door for them. Bas had his arms full of garment bags and the woman had two large leather cases in both of her hands. “Where would you like the goods?”

“This way!” Caitlin led them both up the stairs to Taggie’s room, which had the most space and the full-length mirror.

Bas dumped the bags on the bed while the woman set her cases on the floor. “It’s Sharon,” sticking out her hand.

Caitlin grabbed it and shook it vigorously, with a wide grin, “Caitlin.”

“I’m a makeup and wardrobe specialist at Corinium, and when Bas rang this afternoon and told me he needed a favor, I was only too happy to oblige.” Sharon gave Bas a salacious wink over her shoulder, which Bas returned, and she turned back to the O’Hara sisters. “I’m here to gussy you both up, courtesy of Corinium Television and the best their Makeup and Wardrobe has to offer.” Caitlin gave a delighted squeal.

“Caitlin, you start. I’ll help Bas with the rest of the bags. I also need to sort Daddy’s supper.”

As Taggie and Bas each filled their arms with the remaining garment bags from the backseat of his car, Taggie turned to Bas. “Thank you for this. It’s very kind. The invitation itself, but all of this,” she added, shaking the garment bags for emphasis.

Bas gave her a good-natured smirk from under his sunglasses. “You’re helping me out, really. And I relish any chance to get one over on my old Scrooge of a brother.” Once the bags were dropped on the bed, Bas turned to Taggie. “This is the last of them. I have to go sort some things back at Bar Sinister, but I’ll be back for both of you ladies no later than 8pm.”

As Taggie went back downstairs, Caitlin gleefully ripped open all the bags, as if it was early Christmas. Sharon started clicking open cases and pulling out trays and trays of cosmetics and hair styling equipment.

“What’s your style?” Sharon asked Caitlin.

“Chaotic yet alluring but also a bit threatening.”

Sharon laughed as she unwound the cord of a curling iron.

“And your sister?”

Caitlin became suddenly serious. “Taggie needs to look ravishing tonight. Someone’s broken her heart, and he’s going to be there tonight with the other woman, and she needs to shine.”

“Caitlin!” Taggie was standing at the door with two trays containing some bread, cheese, and butter—dinner for the three of them and Declan.

“What? It’s true!”

Taggie rolled her eyes and disappeared briefly to drop one tray by Declan’s door.

“Seriously. You need to make her look as hot as possible,” Caitlin whispered to Sharon.

“I don’t think it will take much to make you stunning,” Sharon said, looking Taggie up and down, as she walked back into the room, still chomping her gum. “And ‘revenge looks’ happen to be one of my specialties. They’re a staple of soaps, and I’m the foremost wardrobe person on Four Men Went to Mow. Bas also told me this needed to be a special night for both of you.”

“I’ve told Taggie she should shag Bas.”

“CAITLIN.” Taggie rolled her eyes and sat on the edge of the bed.

“You should. He’s the best casual fuck I’ve ever had.” Sharon said absentmindedly, sorting through the garment bags on the bed.

“See, Tag? A testimonial from a satisfied customer!”

Taggie threw a balled up shirt at her sister and couldn’t help but laugh. Caitlin was incorrigible.

“For a night like tonight, dress, hair, and makeup—you need to look at them all like armor—you wear them as if you’re going into battle. And I think this will do nicely.” Sharon held up a dress and looked at Taggie approvingly.

Taggie blanched. “I-I-isn’t it a little much?”

“All’s fair in love and war. I’m also a firm believer in Dutch Courage.” Sharon pulled out a metal flask, unscrewed the lid, and passed it to Taggie. “Let’s get to work.”

2. The Hunt Ball - Part 1

"FUCK, Tag. If you weren't my sister, *I* would ravish you."

Taggie laughed and rolled her eyes, admiring her profile in the mirror. "Sharon, you're a miracle worker." She had had enough pulls from Sharon's flask that she felt excited to go out tonight. Even Taggie had to admit that she looked *good* .

"One last touch." Sharon fastened a gold necklace around Taggie's neck. As she straightened the clasp against Taggie's neck, they heard a car crunching on the gravel in front of the Priory. The three of them looked at Taggie's reflection. Sharon grinned. "Ready to go to war."

Sharon shooed them both out the door, blowing a bubble with her gum. "Off you both go. I'm going to ring up my husband and have him give me a lift to take the rest of these back to Corinium before they're missed." Upon seeing Taggie's mildly stricken expression, Sharon laughed. 'My Baddingham bonking days were long over by the time I met my better half.' She gave Taggie a wink. Caitiln snorted with laughter, seeing Sharon's fingers crossed behind her back. "I'm sure Bas will get these off of you," with a pointed look at Taggie, "and back to the studio." Sharon tosssed Taggie her flask. "Here, take this. You might need it."

"Come ON, Tag!!" Caitlin yelled, dragging her sister down the stairs and to the front door.

"Caitlin, give me my coat."

"Absolutely not. I want to see Bas's face when he sees you." Taggie rolled her eyes.

"Caitlin, you are incorrigible."

Caitiln grinned. "Come on, chin up, shoulders back. Let them all eat their hearts out." With that, Caitlin linked one arm with Taggie, draping their coats over the other, and pulled her older sister unceremoniously out of the front door.

Bas was leaning back against the passenger side door of his car, impeccably dressed in a tuxedo, arms crossed, looking up at the moon overhead. The click of the front door closing caught his attention and his eyes rested on the two O'Hara sisters. His face froze, his dark eyes widened, his mouth slightly agape. In that instant, Taggie's heart fell to her feet. *Shit*. Something was wrong—she had torn her dress coming out the door, she had grown a third eye, Sharon had shaved off her eyebrows. However, in the next moment, Bas's face lit up, and he walked up to her. "Christ, Tag," he whispered. He took her hand, kissed it, and slowly spun her in a circle. He turned to Caitlin, a mock serious expression on his face, 'Aphrodite walks among us.' Taggie blushed, but didn't look away or stare at the ground as she would normally have done. She kept her chin up, back straight, shoulders back. Bas, noticing her resolve, grinned wider. "I've never been so happy to be stood up."

A very smug Caitlin handed her sister her coat.

Bas opened the doors for each of them and walked around to the driver's seat. He put the car in gear and looked over at Taggie in the passenger seat. His eyes met and held hers. He

flashed her a dazzling smile, his brown eyes shining, and stepped on the gas, spraying gravel all over the Priory driveway as he peeled out. Taggie and Caitiln laughed as the momentum pressed them back into their seats. *Tonight will be a good night*, Taggie decided.

As they drove, Bas turned on the radio and Tina Turner's voice spilled out of the car's speakers:

You must understand, though the touch of your hand

Makes my pulse react

That it's only the thrill of boy meeting girl

Opposites attract

It's physical

Only logical

You must try to ignore that it means more than that

Oh-oh, what's love got to do, got to do with it?

What's love but a second-hand emotion?

What's love got to do, got to do with it?

Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?

Taggie covertly studied Bas's profile as they drove in the dark. Sharon *did* have a point—one could do far worse than Bas for a casual fling. While Bas had always treated her as a friend, she suspected he would need little encouragement to cross that platonic line. Besides, while she had spent weeks broken over Rupert, Rupert had Cameron in his bed every night and paraded her all over Cotchester.

Maybe Sharon and Caitlin were right—why shouldn't Taggie have some fun of her own?

As they drove down the dark road to Cotchester, Bas knew he was grinning like an idiot. But he didn't care. He snuck a glance at Taggie in the passenger seat.

Not only was she the best chef in the county, kind and charming, but she was also *beautiful* . With her waist-length thick auburn curls undulating down her back, constantly working in the kitchen, perpetually encased in the smell of freshly crushed garlic, rosemary, and fresh bread, she was like a contemporary Hestia. It was easy to see why Rupert was completely bananas over her.

However, in Bas's opinion, his friend had done very poorly by Taggie. Bas had watched them eye-fuck each other for *months* . While he thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle of a moon-eyed Rupert yearning and sneaking glances like a stupid schoolboy half his age, Bas was apprehensive for Taggie. While all that nonsense was a novelty for Rupert (he had already been a practiced degenerate as a schoolboy), Bas suspected that for Taggie, it was not. She was good, kind, someone who likely gave her heart freely, easily.

After the night of Cameron's breakdown in the Priory kitchen, before Taggie fully withdrew from the Venturer meetings, whenever Bas saw Taggie look at Rupert, he felt like he was looking at a small, injured bird in the middle of the road, gazing with adoration up at the truck tire that was about to crush it to death. Bas supposed everyone had to have their heart thoroughly broken at least once in their life as a point of character development (not that he would know), but he certainly didn't enjoy having a front-row seat to Taggie's tragedy. *Tonight will be a good night,* he thought, stealing one last glance.

As they approached Cotchester, Taggie reflected that she did sincerely enjoy Bas's company. Sure he was a complete rake (in his own words, "something of a slut") but he was one of the most affable and good-natured rakes she had encountered (and given her parents' social circles, she had encountered quite the range of rakes). Bas also ran a restaurant and seemed sincerely interested in her thoughts on various menu combinations and dishes for certain occasions. They had a number of these conversations over the past weeks, while he stood in the Priory kitchen, moaning, talking with his mouth full of something she had just made. Taggie enjoyed these conversations, even if his enthusiastic and seemingly constant moaning did make her somewhat uncomfortable.

So while the idea of seeing Rupert and Cameron together made her heart race and her palms sweat, she was comforted by the fact that she would be going out with someone she considered a friend. Taggie also found the idea of a killer outfit and a face of makeup as armor comforting. It was like wearing a mask. *Tonight, she would be a different person.*

When they arrived at the Cotchester arms, the two story venue that always hosted the local fox hunting club's annual ball, dinner had long ended and from the street outside, they could hear the DJ music blasting inside. Bas got out, tossed his keys to the valet (who didn't catch them and had to scramble around for them in the gravel in the dark), and walked around the back of the car, simultaneously opening both passenger-side doors for both Taggie and Caitlin.

"I'm going to go inside and find a spot on the balcony from which to watch your grand entrance, Tag. I want to see everyone drooling over you."

Taggie lifted an eyebrow. "Or you just want to find Archie and make up for lost snogging time."

Caitlin flashed Taggie a grin, saluted her, then skipped off inside. Bas extended his arm, and Taggie took it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to inhale down to her toes. When she opened her eyes, Bas was studying her. "Ready?"

Taggie took a pull of whiskey from Sharon's flask and handed it to Bas, who grinned and took a swig, sliding it into his pocket. Taggie winked at Bas, "Now I am."

As they approached the door, everyone they passed paused their conversations to stare. Taggie's heart stopped. "Bas, what's wrong?"

They stepped up into the foyer and Bas handed both of their coats through the coat check window. He then took both of her hands in his and looked down at her with mock exasperation, a theatrical sigh, and a twinkle in his eye, "Taggie, they're staring because you

look like a goddess." He pulled the flask out of his trouser pocket and shook it in front of her face. 'You better get used to it, darling. You're going to have to deal with it all night. Need a last nip before we go in?' Taggie gave a low chuckle and pushed the flask back toward him. "Any more Dutch Courage, and I'll need to emigrate." Bas laughed as he slid the flask into his pocket, slapping it with his hand. "Grab it anytime you like." Taggie laughed and linked her arm with his, and together they walked through the doors, into the ballroom, into the lights and pounding music.

Rupert, standing between Charles Fairburn and Cameron at the end of the ballroom, was exuding a level of charisma more appropriate for a funeral than a party. His mind was elsewhere.

Rupert had been in crisis management mode for that first 24 hour period after Tony had assaulted Cameron at the Corinium studios, the adrenaline helping him to laser focus on keeping Cameron safe and supported. But in the days that followed, as things returned to a semblance of normalcy, he passed each day in a state of foggy misery.

He turned over and over again in his head those precious few moments in the Priory kitchen with Taggie, before everything went to shit. The feel of her waist under his hands, the soft cotton of her dress, the eagerness and heat in her hands as she reached for him. The shiver that ran down his spine at "But he's not you." He had meant it when he said that he couldn't breathe without her. He had felt like a drowning man as he reached for her in that kitchen. He then recalled the minutes after their kiss in that kitchen, and he hated himself. Cameron was clearly in crisis and needed help, but Christ, until that moment, he hadn't realized that she was actually in *love* with him. He had viewed their whole arrangement as a fun fling that was simply a way to entice her to their side. But screaming at Tony that she would *marry* him, before clobbering Tony with a blunt object? Jesus.

He had made some serious errors in his nearly 40 years of life, but orchestrating this entire situation, which now involved the emotions of himself, two women, his entire estate, and the livelihoods of dozens of people, was without a doubt his stupidest. But the worst of it all was the collateral damage to Taggie. He couldn't look back at her in the Priory kitchen while Cameron collapsed in his arms. He couldn't very well leave Cameron alone, he had made this bed and he must continue to sleep in it. But he had also meant every word he said to Taggie. He was overcome with shame, knowing how the whole scene must have been carving her good, kind, giving heart out of her chest. He couldn't bring himself to look back at her, see his failure, selfishness, betrayal reflected in her eyes. As he held Cameron to his chest and told Bas to call 999, he remembered Taggie's words as she left the Jones' dinner party, *You're disgusting and I want nothing to do with you* . In that moment, he agreed wholeheartedly with Past-Taggie. *He was disgusting* . When he walked out of that kitchen with Cameron, he also intended to walk out of Taggie's life. He *was* disgusting and she deserved better, different. Over the following weeks, he watched Taggie slowly remove herself from the Venturer project and retreat to the kitchen. He wanted to apologize, explain, hold her. But in the end, he found he couldn't face her again. She was the best person he knew and knowing he had destroyed her was too shaming, too horrible. He couldn't do it. Instead, he focused all of his energy into trying not to be civil to Cameron and everyone else on the Venturer team. *He would let her go. He had to.*

Such were Rupert's dark ruminations as he scowled into his whiskey glass.

"Ah, here's Bas! Late, as usual." Charles Fairburn looked back toward the door.

Rupert absently nodded and grunted, not particularly interested. He felt brittle tonight, like his whole body was clenched, here with Cameron. She was bright and sharp as ever, a diamond on his arm. *But she's not you* . The memory of his words sent a shadow over his face.

The DJ started a new song thumping through the speaker:

If I, I get to know your name

Well, I could trace your private number, baby

All I know is that to me

You look like you're lots of fun

Open up your lovin' arms

I want some, want some

I, I set my sights on you (and no one else will do)

And I, I got to have my way now, baby

All I know is that to me

You look like you're havin' fun

Open up your lovin' arms

Watch out, here I, watch out, here I come

You spin me right round, baby, right round

Like a record, baby, right round, round, round

You spin me right round, baby, right round

Like a record, baby, right round, round, round

Standing on the far end of the ballroom dance floor from the door, Rupert realized that the couples on the far end, closest to the door, had stopped dancing and were staring. He could recognize the top of Bas's head walking his way, the crowd parting before him. Rupert turned to Cameron, "What in the fuck?"

"I don't think it's for Bas," Cameron whispered, her lips twisting into an amused smirk.

Cameron was right. Bas was grinning like the cat that got the canary for good reason. He had a goddess on his arm, beaming up at him, and the entire ballroom was paying her tribute.

The first thing he noticed was the dress, it was black, sleeveless, floor-length, the neckline even with her collarbone. It hugged every curve of her body like it was made of liquid that had been poured over her. Her auburn hair was piled on top of her head, with errant curls highlighting her cheekbones, a bold red lip, and gold eyeshadow that extended beyond her

lids, set off by black winged liner that made you feel like her blue eyes were staring into your soul and——

Christ.

It was Taggie.

It was fucking Taggie. Rupert's breath caught in his chest, and he felt like he would choke on it.

Bas and Taggie had made it to the midpoint of the ballroom. Bas, with ever a flair for the dramatic, stopped, took Taggie's hand, and spun her to show her off. As he did, Rupert, along with the rest of the room, realized that Taggie's dress was essentially backless and her necklace featured a long, gold chain that hung down her back, accompanied by a single, long, copper ringlet, both of which drew the eye to the exposed length of her cream-colored back. Rupert felt lightheaded and ill. *It was fucking Taggie it was Taggie why was she here it was Taggie Jesus Fuck—*

"Aw, look at Baby Taggie, all grown up. And by the looks of it, about to be devoured by Bas Baddingham," Cameron joked, side-eyeing Rupert, expecting him to laugh along. She was surprised when instead he blanched and drained his whiskey. She noticed his hand was shaking. She leaned forward, concerned, and looked up into his face. "Rupert, are you okay?"

He grabbed a full tumbler of whiskey off of a passing tray, replacing it with his empty, and gave her a hard, forced smile. "Never better."

Taggie set her jaw and held Bas's arm as they entered the ballroom. Slowly, the couples around them stopped dancing to stare and the crowd began to part to get a better look as they moved forward.

"Christ, I feel like fucking Moses parting the Red Sea" Bas quipped.

"You're welcome," Taggie responded with a wink and a smug half-smile.

"Oooo, very cheeky, Miss O'Hara." Bas stopped and gave her a spin. He looked incredibly pleased with himself. His brown eyes were very soft and very warm on her, and she felt butterflies in her stomach.

"Self-satisfaction looks good on you, Bas," she breathed as she took his arm again. Flirting with him felt easy, natural. He was handsome, charming, a friend, but she didn't *love* him. That lowered the stakes. It was *fun*.

"It always has," he responded. She laughed. Out of the corner of her eye, she had noticed Rupert and Cameron, both as stunning as always, at the end of the ballroom. Taggie tensed.

Bas felt it, followed her gaze, squeezed her arm and flashed her a winning smile. "No need for any unpleasantness tonight. And as you are the belle of the ball, I don't intend to let you out of my sight." She let him lead her to a space along the wall where an attendant stood with a tray of champagne flutes, on the opposite side of the ballroom from where Rupert and Cameron were situated.

Rupert had been on edge for weeks—ever since she moved in, really—short with her, impatient. They still slept together, lived their lives together, but it felt like Rupert never really relaxed. He was tense, tightly wound, and Cameron felt like at any moment he would snap.

He had been in a better (slightly) mood tonight, but that had all fallen apart as soon as Bas and Taggie O'Hara had swanned in.

Cameron was not one who was quick to pick apart other women. She had been sincerely impressed by Taggie's appearance. She looked amazing. Cameron was also 99% sure she recognized both the dress and gold pendant as belonging to Corinium's wardrobe department. *I'll be damned* , she thought with a wry smile.

Her admiration soured, however, when she turned to look at Rupert. He was looking at Taggie like a starving man considering a rare steak. He eyes were ravenous, desperate. It had been clear to Cameron (and she assumed everyone else) that Taggie had a massive crush on Rupert, but it had never *really* occurred to her that Rupert would have any real interest in Taggie. She was a dyslexic schoolgirl who baked cookies. There was no way someone like that, simple and wholesome, could hold Rupert's interest. However, the straight-backed, clear-eyed, shining *woman* that entered the ballroom this evening—that was exactly the type of new plaything that Rupert craved, would pursue just as ruthlessly as he had pursued Cameron. Cameron's hands tightened into fists at her sides. She just needed to remind Rupert that she still shone brightest and that she was the only woman here that was his equal. He didn't need a pretty child to play with. *He had her.*

Rupert drained yet another tumbler of whiskey, and he knew he was well down the path to getting incredibly drunk tonight. The idea pleased him. He also knew he was well down the path to pissing off Cameron. That idea did not please him. He could hear Taggie's voice, her laugh, a few meters to his left, and it took all his willpower not to turn, to look, to stare, to desperately lap her up with his eyes, like a man dying of thirst at a desert oasis. He reminded himself that had made his choice. His choice, who was standing beside him, was becoming more and more irritable by the minute, not appreciating his monosyllabic responses to all of her attempts at conversation and his generally dour mood. Thankfully Freddie and Valerie Jones had drifted over, and Valerie's inane babble gave Rupert cover to glower at a blank spot on the wall across the ballroom. Finally having enough, both of his sulking and Valerie's monologue about the best fabric for curtains, Cameron placed Rupert's arm in a vice grip. "Let's dance," she hissed. Knowing he had to make some type of gesture to keep the peace, he put his arm around her waist and pulled to the floor, "As you wish."

That seemed to placate her. Her face softened and she pressed herself to him, resting her head on his shoulder as the last bars of the song played over the speaker. Suddenly the lights in the ballroom turned red, and he felt sick. "*I've never seen you looking so lovely as you did tonight…*" played out over the speakers, and his already-tense body stiffened. He felt a magnetic pull behind him to where he knew Taggie was standing. Fighting the urge to look back at her, he closed his eyes and he was back on that floor with Taggie on New Year's Eve at the Priory, memorizing the details of her face, marveling at the thrill he felt when she closed her fingers over his. He had never returned the bracelet she made him take back.

Instead, he kept it in a drawer in his study in Penscombe. He took it out and looked at it, reliving every moment of that dance, more often than he would like to admit. *Pathetic* , he thought. A thumb pressing into his neck snapped him out of his reverie. He opened his eyes to see Cameron looking up at him, her eyes soft. “I love you,” she whispered. Rupert didn’t respond, but tried to smile. He suspected he failed, based on the disappointment that passed over Cameron’s features. He lifted her chin and kissed her woodenly. Cameron leaned in, melting into him and kissing him back rather feverishly, perhaps trying to overcome his own ambivalence with her own enthusiasm. The thought only made him more miserable.

A circle of friendly faces had gathered around Taggie and Bas. It included Monica Baddington, Charles Fairburn, Gerald, and Lizzie Vereker. The Hunt Ball was a community institution, making it the one neutral ground where Taggie could mingle with people on the Corinium side without raising suspicion. And she was glad of it. She found Lizzie Vereker a delight—the words of kindness and affirmation she offered Taggie felt like more mothering than Maud had ever given her. Monica Baddingham also had a quiet kindness and sharpness that Taggie appreciated. Monica had just asked Taggie if she would fill her freezer over the coming weeks for when Archie was home from the school holidays over Christmas. Taggie enthusiastically agreed. While Taggie did run a business, crafting food was also an act of care, and she relished the opportunity to craft for and feed the people that she cared for. Monica smiled, clasped Taggie’s hand, and said she would ring her with the menu in the next week.

Monica released a small sigh as her eye caught on something (or someone) just over Taggie’s shoulder. Taggie turned—Monica was looking at her despondent-looking husband, Tony Baddingham, who was standing in a small cluster of people down the wall from where they stood. As he insisted his injury was “an accident,” he had been out and about at events, including this one, keeping his distance from the Venturer folk, but attempting to maintain some fiction of normalcy. At first Taggie thought Tony was staring holes into her, which sent a knife of ice into her heart. However, she realized his vision was fixed on a point beyond her. She followed his gaze, and it led her right to Rupert and Cameron, now standing next to Freddie and Valerie Jones, a few metres down the ballroom.

Taggie had been studiously avoiding looking at Rupert since they arrived, and it had been exhausting. For months, she had felt like there was an invisible thread that connected them—no matter the space they were in, it pulled them together. It was magnetic, a need to be near each other, to look at each other. Each time their eyes met, it was a silent acknowledgement that each had been looking for the other. It was a silent intimacy that Taggie had treasured, the ambiguity of it was infuriating but also reassuring—in that liminality, before that night in the kitchen, there was always a *chance* that Rupert saw her, felt something for her, like she did for him. That he would finally claim her. Even tonight, given all of the past weeks’ events, Taggie could feel that thread, still there, intact. Pulling at her. However, tonight, each time she felt that same old tug, she imagined taking a giant set of shears and cutting that thread. Rupert had moved in Cameron—he was lost to her, probably forever. She needed to accept it and move on. However, she indulged herself with a glance at Cameron. She was radiant. She wore a red, strapless gown that fit her like a glove, highlighting her petite hourglass figure. She looked like she had walked off of the cover of *Vogue* . While it pained her, Taggie grudgingly thought, for what had to be the hundredth time, that Cameron, of all the Cotchester set, *was* the best match for Rupert. Glamorous, strong, sharp, driven—they seemed made for each

other. That charitable thought evaporated as soon as she saw Rupert's arm snake around Cameron's waist and him lead them out to the dance floor.

Taggie tried to focus on the conversation around her, where Lizzie was explaining the marketing for her latest book release. However, the opening bars of "Lady in Red" began to play, the dance floor suddenly drenched in soft red light.

I have been blind

The lady in red

Is dancing with me, cheek to cheek

There's nobody here, it's just you and me

It's where I want to be

But I hardly know this beauty by my side

I'll never forget the way you look tonight

Taggie froze, suddenly, she was back on the Priory dance floor at New Year's Eve with Rupert. Held close, an unexpected moment of intimacy, a moment she had replayed in her head thousands of times. The moment that started it all. She stared down into her champagne flute as if her gaze could drill a hole in it. Despite how painful the last weeks had been, that memory was one she had locked away and she expected it was one she would treasure and revisit for the rest of her life. In spite of herself, she looked up and to where she had last seen Rupert and Cameron. They were still on the dance floor, now bathed in soft red light, just as she and Rupert had been on New Year's Eve. Taggie watched with a sinking feeling as Rupert's index finger slid under Cameron's chin, tilting her face up to his, the same way he had done in the Priory kitchen as she had sat, panicking on a chair in front of him. Soft, gentle, caring. *Loving*, Taggie thought. It felt like time stopped as Taggie watched Rupert and Cameron's lips meet in a gentle yet passionate kiss as they swayed to the music. *She's not you.* Rupert's words from that night arose unbidden, and again, they felt damning. A reminder that Cameron was *that* Lady in Red for Rupert.

Taggie felt like she had been kicked in the stomach and her mind was suddenly made of confetti that had been thrown into the wind. She turned her attention back to Lizze, absorbing exactly none of what she was excitedly relaying. Taggie smiled and nodded, hoping to God no one would ask her any questions. Taggie felt Bas's arm slide around her, his hand clasping her shoulder and pulling her close to him, his thumb gently stroking the skin on her bare shoulder. She looked up at him and smiled weakly. He gave her a small, reassuring smile in return. The gesture grounded her, kept the shredded pieces of her mind from floating away. She took another deep breath and leaned into Bas's side.

Draining his flute of champagne and placing it down on an empty table, Bas turned to Taggie, extending his hand, clearly asking her to dance. She hesitated. The songs and dancers had switched multiple times since Lady in Red, and Rupert and Cameron were no longer within sight on the dance floor.

Bas gave a theatrical sigh and slid the flask out of his pocket. “Dost the lady require some Courage?” Taggie laughed and shook her head. She drained her own champagne flute, and took Bas’s hand, following him out to the floor as the last bars of 99 Red Balloons faded into silence, the dance floor still basked in the glow of red lights.

Suddenly the room went black and the lights began to flash, creating a dark, rave-like ambience, and the opening bars of Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” blasted out of the speakers. Around them, couples begin to scream and throw their hands in the air. Bas pulled Taggie in close, one hand at her waist, the other holding her hand.

“I’m not a very good dancer.”

He winked. “Just stay close and you’ll be fine.”

The champagne had gone to her head in the most lovely way—she felt light, freer. She pressed herself tightly against him and followed his movements. She looked up at him, and he grinned down at her, lip-syncing along with Madonna.

When you call my name, it’s like a little prayer

I’m down on my knees, I wanna take you there

In the midnight hour, I can feel your power

Just like a prayer, you know I’ll take you there

Taggie laughed a deep, sincere laugh. *He was ridiculous.*

In the darkness, under the flashing lights, the champagne making the edges of everything seem soft, Taggie was happy, Rupert and Cameron momentarily forgotten. She was having fun, and she felt beautiful. Bas spun her, then pulled her back in, guiding her around the dance floor with impeccable rhythm. She laughed and slid one hand around the back of his neck. When he placed his hand on her lower back and his thumb softly ran back and forth over her bare skin exposed by the plunging back of her dress, a pleasant shiver raced up her spine. His face was close to hers, their usual gap in height bridged by the heels she wore. Their eyes met and held. Taggie’s wide smile slowly faded from her lips, which were slightly parted. She swallowed heavily, suddenly aware of the solidness of his body and her hands, the sound of both of their breathing, a steady line beneath the pop beat. Her eyes went to Bas’s lips, then back to his eyes. Bas’s brown eyes searched her bright blue ones. “Is this what you want?” he whispered, a very wicked shine in his eyes, which was matched by the twinkle in her own.

The lights flashed around them, and the music began to build—the crowd around them singing along in the flashing darkness:

Just like a prayer, your voice can take me there

Just like a muse to me, you are a mystery

Just like a dream, you are not what you seem

Just like a prayer, no choice your voice can take me there

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes bright, a small smile on her lips.

In an instant, Bas stopped moving them to the music and took her face in both of his hands and kissed her. They stood perfectly still in the middle of the dancefloor full of swaying couples. Taggie had never been kissed like that before, not even by Rupert. With Rupert, it had been fraught, hesitant, the culmination of months of yearning, almost an accident in the kitchen. With Ralphie and Seb, they were eager but sloppy boys. Bas was *not* a boy, this was *not* an accident, and God, was he *good* at it. When they parted, the lights were slowly coming back on, and another song was beginning to play on the speakers. Taggie's head was spinning, but not from the champagne. She was breathless. She noticed with no small amount of satisfaction that Bas also looked rather disoriented and out of breath. She grinned up at him and this time, it was she who kissed *him*, pulling him down by both of the lapels of his tuxedo. She could feel him smiling against her mouth, and his hands went to her lower back and the back of her neck, pressing her into the full length of him. She opened her mouth for him, and he slid his tongue into her mouth. She might not love Bas, but God, she *did* love *this.*

On the other side of the dancefloor, Seb and Daysee stood side by side. Seb had a direct line of sight to witness Taggie and Bas's rather dramatic embrace. Taggie had broken up with him the day after Venturer was invited to submit the full application. It hadn't surprised him, really, but he was still feeling mopey about it. This passionate, public display didn't help.

Seb sighed heavily and took another sip from his champagne flute.

Daysee followed his gaze and put a sympathetic hand on his arm. "I know it means you're not her type, Seb, but I *do* believe there are benefits to *not* being middle-aged."

Seb spit his champagne out, coughing. He looked at Daysee, laughing as he gasped for breath. "Very droll, Days!"

Daysee looked at him, confused, clearly unaware she had said something funny.

Seb laughed and drained what was left of his drink, setting it on an end-table, his spirits temporarily lifted. He took her hand. "Come on, Days—let's dance." She smiled happily and followed him onto the floor.

3. The Hunt Ball - Part 2

On the edge of the dancefloor, Rupert, Cameron, Lizzie, Freddie, Valerie, and Monica stood together. As the ballroom lights dropped and the floor converted to a rave and Madonna blared on the speakers, Monica yelled over the music to joke about not understanding young people these days. The group of them looked out at the dancefloor in silence—the music too loud to talk over, the darkness too complete to easily walk about without falling over someone. When the lights began to come back on, gradually, the group of them all saw it at the same time. It was impossible not to see. In the soft light, their complete lack of movement making them stand out like a pair of trees on a plain, were Bas and Taggie. The light made her auburn hair glow like a halo around her head, and *Bas was kissing her* . When the scoundrel finally pulled back, Rupert watched Taggie grin. Her face radiated joy. He watched her pull Bas back in and Bas shove his whole fucking tongue in her mouth, and slide his hand inside her dress, at the small of her back. Rupert felt like he might vomit, like the wind had been knocked out of him. *I'll fucking kill him the fucking piece of shit he doesn't deserve to touch her little finger fucking Christ I swear——*

"RUPERT."

He was snapped out of his homicidal fantasies by the urgent yells of the rest of his circle. He suddenly realized they were speaking to/yelling at *him* . He had no idea for how long. And he didn't particularly care.

"RUPERT." It was Cameron. He ignored her, his eyes boring a hole into the back of Bas's head. Then suddenly an attendant was basically on top of him, shooing him away with a broom.

"What the FUCK do you want!?" Rupert snapped, jumping to the side. It was then that he realized that his hand was wet. Fuck, the whole front of his tuxedo was wet. Broken glass crunched under his black loafer.

He looked down and vaguely remembered that he had been holding a full champagne flute when the lights came back on after the Madonna number. He must have crushed it in his hand as he watched Bas and Taggie on the dance floor. *Taggie* . His eyes snapped back to where he had last seen them. Bas had finally stopped molesting her long enough for them to exit the dance floor.

"Rupert." Cameron called, this time softer. She was reaching for his hand, probably to see if he cut himself. He twisted out of her grip and stalked away from the circle, his jaw clenched, charging directly towards Taggie and Bas. He grabbed Taggie by the wrist and pulled her onto the dance floor without a word, desperate to have her away from Bas and his polluting influence, desperate to be near her, to touch her, to see her. He knew he was being reckless, but frankly, he was all out of fucks to give.

When they came apart the second time, Taggie felt like *she* was the one who was grinning like an idiot. Both pleased and a little sheepish, she took Bas's hand and led him off the dance floor, aware that people were staring again—not just because she looked great, but because everyone had seen her and Bas snogging in the middle of the dance floor. Maybe it was the champagne and whiskey, maybe it was Bas's contagious confidence—but she didn't really give a fuck. She threw what she hoped was a cheeky smile over her shoulder to Bas.

She didn't notice him until his hand had already closed over her wrist and she was being dragged in the opposite direction, back onto the dance floor. It was Rupert, looking like thunder, dragging her off like an angry father would drag off a misbehaving toddler, without a word and with a complete air of dominance and entitlement. She felt like she had whiplash.

When he finally released her wrist, he turned and tried to gather her into his arms. She tried to shake his grip off of her shoulders, but he pulled her in again, more insistently, stronger, this time. Caught off guard, her moment ruined, she found herself getting angry. Without looking at Rupert's face, she put both of her hands on his chest and pushed as hard as she could, which was enough to free her from his grasp. She crossed her arms over her chest and, remembering her marching orders, held her spine and chin up, standing an arm's length away from him. Finally, slowly, she allowed herself to meet his eyes. Her eyes widened, surprised. *He looks like shit,* Taggie thought.

He was clearly drunk, and he looked deranged. Despite everything, seeing him in such a state did move Taggie. Her eyes took in the chiseled lines of his face, his cheekbones, the dark circles under his eyes. She felt herself soften—she wanted to reach out, cup his face in her hands, pull him in close, and soothe whatever angst had hollowed him out like this. But she remembered Cameron, she remembered "Lady in Red" literally minutes ago, she remembered the month without a single word or look. Again, Taggie imagined taking out the giant set of shears and cutting the thread that bound them.

"What do you want, Rupert?"

He scoffed and threw his hands in the air, looking up at the ceiling, then back down at her. "What do *I want*??" His voice was low, hoarse, his eyes dark and hot. Her heart stopped. For a moment, she was afraid that he would make some desperate declaration of love to her, in the middle of the ballroom, drunk, with a hundred witnesses.

"You haven't spoken to me in a month—what could possibly be so urgent that you need to make such a scene?" Her words had more edge than she felt. They felt like the only weapon she had.

Rupert felt the edge in her words. He also saw the pity and softness in her eyes, which made him resent himself even more. He felt like a wounded, cornered animal, and he lashed out like one. "A month? Is that all?," he scoffed. "I would have thought it would have taken longer than that for you to become a complete tart. You certainly look the part tonight, but apparently you've learned to act it, too, letting the local Lothario stick his tongue down your throat in broad fucking daylight."

Taggie's head snapped back as if he had slapped her. She could feel a lump forming in the back of her throat, and for a moment, she felt all the confidence she had built, all the *fun* she had had tonight slither out of her, as a chill ran through her body. Her eyes stung. She was in

no danger of any declaration of love after all. She imagined the giant shears chopping up his body, along with the thread.

Her eyes narrowed. “How dare you?” she whispered.

She wanted to say more, but words failed her. And after such an insult, she refused to humiliate herself further by stuttering any type of defense or justification of herself. She may still love him, but he was being a total *shit*. She turned on her heel and walked away. She had no idea where she was going, but she knew she needed to be alone. The tears were coming, and she refused to let anyone, God forbid Rupert, see them. As her vision began to blur, she kept her chin up and walked confidently forward, despite having no idea where she was going. She just prayed that she was headed in the direction of somewhere other than the loo or a dead-end corner of the ballroom.

Tony Baddingham watched his younger brother follow after Taggie, then his eyes returned to Rupert, standing alone on the dance floor, also watching Taggie walk away. Rupert had deflated like a balloon and looked haggard, exhausted. It gave Tony no small sense of satisfaction to realize that he knew that exact posture—it had been his when Cameron told him she would marry Rupert to stay in the U.K. It was the stance of a broken man. Yes, there was no other interpretation. *Rupert was in love with Taggie O’Hara.* Tony smiled. This was a delicious piece of knowledge to possess. He could make Rupert’s life absolute hell. Although, it seemed like he was doing quite a good job of that all on his own.

Bas found Taggie around the corner on the back terrace, standing in the darkness. She was facing away from him, ever so slightly illuminated by the light shining from the open doorway behind him. The light glinted off the gold chain that laid parallel to her spine. Her hands were clenched into fists, pressed firmly into the terrace wall and she was looking out into the grounds behind the Cotchester Arms. He could tell she was shaking, and it felt like a flashback to the Priory kitchen some weeks prior. He frowned at the memory. *Poor kid can’t catch a break.*

He cleared his throat, and she looked over her shoulder, as he approached. Seeing it was him, she gave a weak laugh and turned around, leaning back against the waist-high stone wall. She used the heel of her hands to dab at her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be. You’re not the arsehole.” With one hand, he pulled the flask from his pocket. With the other, he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. He held them both out in front of him.

Taggie hesitated for a moment, then grabbed the flask and tipped it back. Handing it back to Bas, she then took the handkerchief, dabbing at her eyes. Handing it back, she looked up at him, mustering a slightly stronger smile this time. “He really was, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. A jealous, drunk, complete arsehole.” He offered her the flask once more, eliciting a small but sincere chuckle. Taggie put her hands up, “I think I have enough courage for now.”

He slid the flask back into his trouser pocket and stepped closer to her, cupping the side of her face in one hand. “You okay?”

Taggie closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, nodding. It was soothing, grounding. Despite the spectacle they had made minutes earlier, this touch wasn’t sexual. Just kind, concerned. She had come to appreciate over the past weeks how kind Bas was. “Yes,” she said, more firmly, looking up at him, covering his hand with her own. “Thank you.”

He gave her a brilliant smile. “As much as I enjoy playing the white knight, before you were accosted, Caitlin made me promise to find you and bring you to the karaoke machine. Freddie brought it tonight, and if you remember her monologue on the drive here, Caitlin is positively rabid to have her turn at the mic and insists you join her.”

Now Taggie laughed a deep, belly laugh. Bas loved the sound. “God forbid we stand in the way of Caitlin and her three minutes of fame. How do I look?”

“Flawless.”

She took his arm, and together, they went back inside.

Rupert knew he had been a right shit. Taggie didn’t deserve that. No one did, but least of all her. She looked divine, had looked at him with kindness, *after everything* , and he had, what? Called her a whore? *Jesus* . He knew he was drunk and he knew he was making a spectacle of himself. He wasn’t used to being in this position—having something, *someone* who he wanted, be so out of reach. He supposed this was a consequence of being so bloody entitled his whole life. Women, money, prestige—he had had his way for as long as he could remember. Reviewing some of the bigger decisions in his life, he felt like he was reviewing the behavior of a rotten toddler. *Enough of that.* He was too drunk for this level of introspection. He barely managed it when sober.

All he knew was that it felt like his heart was beating outside of his body, walking around, looking like a goddess and getting tongued by Bas Baddingham, the second-biggest degenerate in the Cotswolds. And Rupert was absolutely miserable.

His self-pitying self-flagellation was interrupted by a flash of red darting his direction across the dancefloor. *Christ, Cameron’s coming to collect me.* He began to push through the crowd in the opposite direction, hunched down to stay out of sight, bumping into couples, slipping between dancing partners, grunting apologies, casting the occasional glance over his shoulder. Finally he found himself in the small, dark room adjacent to the ballroom. It was full of drunks fighting over the next shot at the karaoke machine. Here, at last, was a place he could stew and lick his wounds in peace. He snatched a champagne flute from a passing tray, promptly drained it, and swapped it for a full whiskey tumbler on a tray passing in the opposite direction. He tucked himself into a dark corner to observe the debaucherous howling coming from the stage. *Perfect. Even Cameron won’t brave this nightmare to scold me.*

As they crossed the threshold into the karaoke room from the ballroom, Taggie was accosted by a gleeful Caitlin.

“TAG. FINALLY. I’ve been waiting AGES.” She then looked from Bas to Taggie, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. “Come ON.” She grabbed both of them by the hand and began to drag them toward the stage, to stand beside the stage’s edge, at the foot of some makeshift wooden stairs.

“You need to sing one with me, Taggie. Or I’ll have a fit.”

“Caitlin, no—I-I can’t.” Taggie gestured at the teleprompter everyone was reading lyrics from.

Caitlin rolled her eyes, then grinned at her sister. “I told Freddie to do a song you know. No need to read the words!”

“Cait—”

“Come on, Tag!! Everyone’s so drunk, no one will even notice or remember! Pleaaaaaseeeee.”

The two men who had been on stage, howling Careless Whisper to each other, stumbled down the stairs beside them. Taggie, still shaking her head, was refusing to budge, pulling back against Caitlin, the two of them leaning backwards in opposite directions. *Fuck if I haven’t had enough of the spotlight tonight* , Taggie thought.

Then the opening bars to Dolly Parton’s 9-to-5 began to boom out of the speakers, to an enthusiastic roar from the assembled, drunk crowd. In spite of herself, Taggie laughed. She looked to Bas and slapped his thigh. Grinning, he produced the flask, and she took a pull, handed it back, and allowed Caitiln to drag her up the rickety wooden steps. This was their song that the two of them had scream-sang to each other in their London kitchen, to the despair of both their parents. Caitlin was right. Everyone was far too drunk to care. Taggie loved her sister and knew her sister loved her, and she would sing this song until sunrise if it would make Caitlin happy. The words started to scrawl on the screen before they made it up the steps, and Caitlin was belting out the opening lines as they ascended the steps, before she made it to the microphone:

Tumble out of bed and I stumble to the kitchen

Pour myself a cup of ambition

And yawn and stretch and try to come to life

Jump in the shower and the blood starts pumpin’

Out on the street, the traffic starts jumpin’

With folks like me on the job from nine to five

Taggie, standing across from her sister, laughed, swaying in time to the underlying piano beat of the song, as if they were back in their London kitchen. Caitlin held the mic and screamed into it with such fervor that Taggie presumed she must have snuck a generous amount of champagne. Taggie took the second verse, as she always had in their kitchen, closing her eyes, and singing from the bottom of her stomach, reaching out to her sister, who took her hand and howled along.

They let you dream just to watch ’em shatter

You're just a step on the boss-man's ladder

But you got dreams he'll never take away

You're in the same boat with a lotta your friends

Waitin' for the day your ship'll come in

An' the tide's gonna turn and it's all gonna roll your way

The final notes barely faded away before the next candidate, a sweaty and drunk red-headed man, plowed up the steps and grabbed the microphone from Caitlin. She and Taggie walked down the stairs to the raucous cheers of the crowd. Taggie gave her sister a grin. She felt on top of the world. She saw Bas, standing at the edge of the steps, his hand extended, and she took it, as the opening bars to Footloose began to play, triggering a whoop of excitement from the crowd in the salon.

Bas watched Taggie and Caitlin on the stage, laughing behind his hand. *Caitlin was definitely drunk.* As Taggie and Caitlin came off the stage, he held out a hand for Taggie that she took and held as she descended the steps. As the opening bars to Footloose began to play, he grinned and pulled her after him into the crowd.

Exhilarated by her duet with Caitlin, Taggie was still riding the high as Bas pulled her back into his arms as Footloose began to play over the speakers. The sweaty, drunk redhead was a surprisingly competent singer. She let Bas lead her, spinning her out, pulling her back in. She laughed and clung to him, trying to keep up. *He really was a very good dancer.* All of the earlier unpleasantness temporarily forgotten, she laughed against Bas's cheek, as she watched Archie Baddingham trying to copy his uncle's dance moves, spinning Caitlin out and back, both of them tripping over their own feet.

She could feel how solid and muscular Bas was, his arm around her waist holding her tightly against him. She knew he was an avid polo player, and tonight she had come to appreciate what that meant. He smelled like sweat, tobacco, whiskey, and something she couldn't name, but reminded her of fresh sage. His cheek was smooth against hers and his breath was hot on her neck.

As the music faded and the next song started, they stopped dancing. Taggie pulled away from him, standing at arm's length. The two of them panted for breath. She took in his tall, dark, handsome form, and thought about how it felt to be pressed against him. She remembered the shiver that ran up her spine when his thumb grazed her lower back. Still holding his gaze, she felt a rising sense of determination and exhilaration. A slow smile crept across her face. *She was going to shag Bas Baddington* .

Bas noticed Taggie's steady, hot gaze as they stood, a meter apart. If he had seen that look once, he had seen it a hundred times. *Taggie O'Hara wanted to shag him.* He met her eyes, a

pleasant tingle running through him, a sly smile of his own matching hers. *It would be a good night after all.*

From a few metres away, Caitlin saw the look that passed between her sister and Bas from over Archie's shoulder. She gave a happy squeal as Archie leaned in for a kiss. Archie grinned, thinking the squeal was for him. Not one to disappoint, Caitlin leaned in and kissed him with all the passion she could muster, fueled by the countless glass of champagne she had snatched from unsuspecting attendants. Earlier that night, Caitlin had indeed been perched on the balcony and watched Bas kiss her sister senseless on the dance floor. She had also seen Rupert pull her away and Taggie walk off, distressed. Taggie deserved to have some stupid fun, and Caitlin fully approved of her eye-fucking (and real-fucking) Bas. That was the last thought Caitlin gave her sister as she gave herself over to a sloppy, yet very enthusiastic frenching session with Archie on the karaoke-room floor.

Taggie took Bas's hand and led him out of the karaoke room, back through the ballroom, grabbing a champagne flute in her free hand. She led him back to the dark corner of the terrace where he had found her after her "altercation" with Rupert. Bas followed her silently to the low stone wall. Bas sat on the stone wall, his long legs hanging freely, watching her expectantly. Taggie stood in front of him, sipping her champagne. He took the flask from his pocket. The silence was heavy, full. Both of them waited for the other to make the first move.

Taggie could hear her blood pounding in her ears and was hyper-aware of the sound of her own breath. Her blood felt warm in her veins. She took a deep breath and drained her champagne and set her empty glass down decisively. She turned to face Bas. She stepped closer, closer, until she was standing between his legs and her nose was nearly, but not quite, touching his, holding his gaze. As on the dance floor, she grabbed him by his lapels with both hands and pulled him to her. Again, she felt him smile against her mouth, pleased by her eagerness. One of his hands slid again inside the back of her dress, the other reached up to cup her face. When they parted, they were both breathing heavily, their foreheads pressed together.

This time, Bas pulled her back in. Taggie kissed him back, again opening her mouth for his tongue. Meanwhile, her fingers worked at the top buttons on his shirt, succeeding with undoing the top three buttons (despite her fumbling), allowing her to slide her hands inside. *God, he was solid*. Their mouths parted for the second time, and this time, Taggie put a leg up over Bas's on the stone wall. Understanding what she meant to do, he put both his hands under her ass and boosted her up, as she swung her other leg around. As Bas sat on the broad stone wall, which acted like a bench, Taggie was straddling him, her dress hiked up around her hips, her legs dangling off the other side of the wall behind him. His put one hand on her knee and slowly slid it up her thigh, letting his thumb slowly draw circles on her upper inner thigh. In her new position, his head had to tilt up to look at her. He placed his other hand on her shoulder and slowly began to slide her dress off her shoulder. She took his face in both of her hands and kissed him again, as she felt her dress fall away. Halfway undressed in his lap, she knew she should be ashamed. *But she wasn't*. She pulled back to look in his eyes, smile, then leaned back in to kiss him again. His mouth left hers and went to her neck, at her newly

exposed shoulder. She curled her fingers into his hair, pulling him into her, and pressed her face into his neck.

Some time later, he wasn't sure how much time had elapsed, Rupert made his way from his corner in the karaoke room. The screaming drunks had finally become too much for even him. What he *did* know was that he was *very* drunk. The realization pleased him. It took the edge off of the ache in his chest. He stumbled his way around the crowd and made his way back to the ballroom. He absentmindedly picked up a champagne flute and drained it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of red. Cameron was in the corner, looking quite angry, and talking to James Vereker. Before she could catch sight of him, Rupert skulked along the edge of the ballroom. He knew there was a back terrace. If only he could get there and be alone, maybe the walls would stop spinning. He successfully made it around the edge of the ballroom, to the back hallway, without being spotted. As he walked through the back doorway, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief, a hand against the doorframe to steady himself. He turned to his left, intending to sit on the low stone wall he knew comprised the railing of the terrace.

Rupert was greeted with what he knew was a couple caught in flagrante, the woman basically naked except for the black fabric of her dress pooled around her waist, straddling a strapping fellow whose head seemed to be buried in her cleavage. God knows he had been in this position more times than he could count. He turned on his heel, intending to walk back into the building, a wry smile on his face, intending leave them to their booze-fueled, semi-public passions when he realized, drunk as he was and despite the darkness, that he recognized both the black dress that was hanging off the body of the woman, as well as her hairstyle and color. *It was Taggie . That meant it must be Bas under her, fucking stripping her naked and debauching her in public .*

"FUCK!" He yelled as he spun back on his heel, to face the pair of them.

"FUCK!"

Both Taggie and Bas froze. Taggie realizing how very undressed she was, began to frantically try to pull her legs back over the terrace wall while trying to pull her dress back up. This nearly sent both her and Bas tumbling backwards. After what felt like an eternity but was likely only a few seconds, she and Bas finally stood side by side against the stone wall, looking disheveled, breathing heavily. Taggie tried and failed to suppress a smile, preparing to give a sheepish excuse for being caught out, until she looked up and realized who was standing there, unsteadily, in the light of the doorway. *It was fucking Rupert.*

"FUCK" Rupert repeated.

He saw red.

Declan thought he was wrong for Taggie, everyone thought he was wrong for Taggie. So he stayed away, did all of this bullshit to keep her close yet, never taint her with his touch, his

claim. And yet here was Bas, just as much of a degenerate, *fucking having her in public.* The injustice of it made him crazy. *He was going to kill Bas.*

Taggie watched Rupert's jaw clench, along with his fists at his side, a spectrum of emotions working themselves out across his face. She watched his features harden as he took in the sight of her and Bas. *Rage, outrage,* she thought.

But as she watched his rage pique and his hands clench into fists at his sides, *she* began to get angry. *He goes home to Cameron, incandescent fucking Cameron, and fucks her every night, yet TAGGIE is NOT ALLOWED to have ANY fun.*

"Rupert, please." She moved toward him, her hands extended.

He didn't even acknowledge that he heard her. He just started to move toward Bas, murder in his eyes.

"RUPERT."

Nothing. He kept moving, fists clenched, jaw clenched. She knew he wanted to beat the shit out of Bas, who stood impassively behind her.

Taggie clenched her fists. She stepped between Rupert and Bas, blocking Rupert's path. "RUPERT, stop, please."

He didn't even make eye contact with her, but moved to dodge around her.

Something in Taggie snapped. She had been invisible her whole life, and now, the man she loved was completely ignoring everything she said, *after* insulting her, and was fixated on what? Beating to a pulp any other man who touched her? Because even though he wouldn't claim her, she should spend the rest of her life, frigid, alone? Like she was a fire hydrant that he had pissed on; no one else was allowed to touch her?

Suddenly her blood felt like white lightning, and she was *angry.* As Rupert went to dodge around her, she (who was still sober, while he was not) reached sideways and grabbed him by the lapels. Using all of her body weight as leverage, she pulled him to the side, catching him off-balance, and made him face her. He was clearly drunk, glassy eyed, unsteady on his feet. That enraged her even more, as it reminded her of her father. Without thinking, her blood feeling like red-hot magma, she slapped him with all the force she could muster. It made a sound like a thunderclap, and Rupert raised a hand to his cheek, tears involuntarily rising to his eyes from the force of it. Even in his drunken state, he was shocked into attention.

"Get the fuck out," she hissed.

His eyes were watering, and suddenly she wasn't sure if they were tears or a response from the slap. She didn't care. She was angry. She suspected she had been quite angry for quite awhile but hadn't been able to admit it to herself. *Well, that ship has sailed.*

"Tag, I—he—you shouldn't—"

She walked up to him and using both hands, pushed him hard. He stumbled backwards.

“Get THE FUCK OUT. You have NO right. You sleep with Cameron every night and want to control me, too? Beat anyone who touches me? GET A FUCKING GRIP, RUPERT.” The pure shock on his face just enraged her more.

She pushed him again and again, until he was backing up into the light of the door of the hallway back to the ballroom. She felt like a snarling, wild animal (her father’s daughter, she thought with no small amount of satisfaction).

“YOU HAVE NO RIGHT,” Taggie hissed as she gave him one final push down the hallway that led back into the ballroom. Suddenly, she noticed a figure standing at the opposite end of the hallway, clad in red. Cameron.

Taggie marched forward, disregarding any attempt Rupert made to touch or speak to her as she charged past him and walked right up to Cameron. “He’s drunk. Take him home. He’s a mess.” Taggie stalked past Cameron.

Cameron felt both a small, new respect for Taggie and then panic. *What the fuck had happened on that terrace?* She had clocked how messy Taggie’s hair was, how upset she was, how she was pulling her dress back into place as she talked back into the ballroom. Cameron panicked. *Had Rupert? Had Taggie and Rupert—* Cameron breathed a deep sigh of relief as she saw Bas Baddingham turn the corner into the hallway, not looking at Rupert, following closely on Taggie’s heels. Bas’s hair was a mess, his tie askew, the top few buttons of his shirt undone. *Thank God,* Cameron thought.

Taggie and Bas came together at the middle of the ballroom. The crowd was slowly dwindling, and the clock on the wall read 3am. Taggie put both of her hands to her head, her body shaking—the adrenaline still coursing through her veins. *I need to get the fuck out of here.*

“Find Caitiln?” they both asked simultaneously. They smiled weakly at each other, Rupert’s outburst ruining the moment.

“I’ll check the karaoke room and balcony,” Taggie said.

“I’ll take the upper balcony,” Bas volunteered.

It was Bas who found Caitlin and Archie, in a close embrace in a closet on the second floor. He opened the closet door, and upon seeing both their teenaged bodies in a close embrace, in an advanced state of undress, Bas immediately clapped his hands over his eyes and took two steps backwards.

“CHRIST.”

Standing a few meters from the closet door while the two of them frantically put their clothes back on, Bas, faced the opposite direction, hands still over his eyes. He stated with a valiant attempt at a casual tone, “Caitlin, we’re leaving. I’ll give you 10 minutes to meet us out front.”

Exactly 9 minutes later, Caitiln appeared out front as they valet brought Bas’s car around. Bas and Taggie stood on either end of her. Caitlin could feel the tension between the two of them. As they pulled away, Caitlin noticed that Rupert and Cameron emerged behind them.

The short drive back to the Priory was silent, very different from the drive earlier that evening. From the backseat, Caitlin noted that Bas and Taggie didn't look at or touch each other. She wondered if something had gone off between them. The thought made her sad. She had really wanted her sister to get a good shagging tonight.

As they took the left turn into the Priory, Taggie's stomach clenched. Taggie knew the ride here had been awkward and silent. *Fucking Rupert* . She kept replaying snippets of the minutes before he had drunkenly interrupted—Bas's hand inside the back of her dress, sliding it off her shoulder. How he had tasted, felt under her hands. She was tense, still aroused, breathing quickly and shallowly. But she didn't know what to say. Bas, usually very easy and charming, also hadn't said anything. Caitlin, usually full of chatter, was also unusually silent in the backseat the entire drive. All of this unsettled Taggie. She looked out her window at the inky black night sky as they drove back to the Priory, and all Taggie could think was that she didn't want the night to end like this.

Bas put the car in park in front of the Priory, and Caitlin got out. Taggie sat, immobile, her hands in her lap. She didn't reach for the door. Taking a deep breath, she looked over at Bas. He was looking at her. She gave him a small smile, and he grinned at her in return. Without reaching for the door, Taggie turned to look at Caitiln, who was beaming at her through the passenger-side window.

"I'll cover you with Daddy," she whispered.

Taggie looked over at Bas, his eyes warm, a mischievous smile on his lips. Taggie turned back to Caitlin, biting her bottom lip. "Thank you," Taggie whispered, with a small wave, as Bas put the car into drive and peeled out of the Priory driveway. As he turned right onto the road outside the Priory, he reached for her hand. Taggie entwined her fingers in his and smiled over at him in the darkness. While Bas couldn't see it, he could feel it, and he pressed his foot to the accelerator. He had never been so eager to get back to the Bar Sinister.

Caitlin watched them leave and skipped into the Priory, very pleased. *Tag deserves it. Good for her.*

Meanwhile, Cameron drove her and Rupert back to Penscombe. It had taken an inordinate amount of time to drag him to the car. She had been very intentional about letting Bas and the O'Hara girls get out of sight before Cameron brought Rupert out to the valet stand. He sulked all the way home, and as Cameron parked the car in front of Penscombe, Rupert nearly tucked and rolled from the vehicle, desperate to get to the front steps and look out over the valley. Cameron watched him release a breath that looked like it weighed 100 pounds, then turn and enter the house. Cameron collected her bag, locked the car, and ascended the steps. She paused on the steps and looked out over the valley at the same place Rupert had paused—the Priory was visible from here and there was a single room lit up on the second floor. *Taggie's room?* , Cameron thought bitterly. *At least Rupert can be satisfied that she's at home and not off being debauched with someone else.*

Meanwhile, at the Priory, Caitlin had sneakily confirmed that Declan was fast asleep. Then, just in case, she had turned on all the lights in Taggie's room and swanned about, her vision slightly blurry at the edges, everything spinning just a bit. Caitiln acted like she imagined a drunk Taggie would act—throwing laundry about, jumping on the bed. For good measure, she also stuffed clothes under the covers of Taggie's bed to mimic a human body. Caitlin would tell her father in the morning that Taggie had too much to drink the night before and wasn't to be bothered. *If* Declan bothered to check, he wouldn't do more than pop his head in, and the blanket stuffing would be perfectly sufficient to deflect his investigation. Most likely, he wouldn't even ask.

Caitlin, relishing the sense of conspiracy, fell backwards on her sister's bed. Tag was such a dark horse. She knew her sister had some sort of fraught, tragic thing with Rupert. But her sister had also made a conquest of Bas Baddingham, the next-most prominent rake in the county. Lying on her back, she grinned up at the ceiling. *My harried, neglected Cinderella of a sister is a real heartbreaker, a true dark horse* . Caitlin couldn't be more proud. She began imagining all the debauched things her sister might do with Bas tonight. However, mid-fantasy, as a result of laying down horizontally, all of the champagne and whiskey Caitlin had stolen off of trays all night, began to bubble back up into her throat. She groaned in horror, clasped her hand to her mouth and sprinted to the second floor loo, barely making it before she retched bile, appetizers, and champagne all over the toilet bowl.

Down the hall, Declan awoke to the sound of violent and miserable vomiting in the bathroom. He imagined Taggie emptying her guts in the toilet after a fun night out, and he was pleased that his eldest daughter was finally having a bit of age-appropriate fun. He rolled over and promptly went back to sleep.

4. The Morning After

The next morning, Taggie awoke, and the first thing that greeted her was a ceiling that she didn't recognize. Images of the previous evening began to flash back through her mind—kissing Bas on the dancefloor, Rupert's insults and her slapping him. Then—coming back with Bas. Scrambling up the stairs to his flat above the Bar Sinister. Her dress hitting the floor. Ripping his shirt open, buttons spraying everywhere. His hands on her, everywhere, *in* her. How it felt to have him inside her, her straddling him as she had on the terrace wall. It had been brief, intense. *And* better than anything she had experienced before.

As she remembered other, smaller details, she felt herself blushing furiously—Bas fumbling blindly, desperately in the dark for a condom in his nightstand, one of her hands in his hair while the other dug its nails into his back, the hot, whiskey taste of his mouth, the smell of their sweat mingled with his cologne, the feeling of his cold gold chain pressed between their skin. She looked away from the ceiling and noted Bas, still sleeping, on his side and facing away from her. Her eyes lingered over the muscled lines in his back. She slowly extracted herself from his bed, careful not to wake him.

She padded down the hallway from the bedroom and found the bathroom. She silently gaped, then chuckled at the shower, which was filled with expensive bath products that other female overnight visitors had brought and left. Taggie removed all the pins from her hair, until it fell loose around her shoulders, and brushed her teeth with her finger. As she showered and washed off the makeup, hairspray, and sweat of the night before, she felt some of the magic of last night washing away with it.

Wrapping herself in a towel, she wandered into the bedroom across the hall from the bathroom—it seemed to be a guest room. The closet, like the shower, was full of expensive women's clothes. She couldn't help but grin—Bas had a high-end boutique here, just from the lost clothes of his one-night stands. Moving on from the closet to the dresser, Taggie found what looked like a collection of Bas's discarded jumpers and extra boxers. She grabbed a worn-looking dark green, cable-knit jumper and pulled it over her head, along with a pair of boxers. She toweled and brushed her hair (there were five brushes in the bathroom cabinet. *Maybe Bas is a rake and a hoarder,* she thought*.)* as she opened the fridge in Bas's kitchen. She was *starving* . But the fridge was empty. Literally empty. So were all the kitchen cabinets. *What kind of bachelor bullshit is this??* Then she remembered that he owned a fully-stocked restaurant downstairs. In her borrowed jumper and boxers and bare feet, she slipped down the back stairs into Bar Sinister to raid the kitchen.

Bas awoke and stretched his arms up toward the ceiling, yawning contentedly. Remembering the night before, a sly smile spread over his face. His mind flooded with memories of Taggie straddling him, her long hair coming loose of its pins, falling down around both of their heads. Their hips moving in time. Her hungry, gasping mouth, her eager hands. The hot, wet feel of her as she moved against his hand, chasing release, her fingers pulling his hair. How she had gasped against his mouth when he put his fingers inside of her.

How she had clung to him, pressing her face into his neck and swearing like a sailor when she came in his hand. It made his cock stir just thinking about it.

His grin became a frown when he noticed that the other half of his bed was empty. The sheets were rumpled and there was an indent in the other pillow. He propped himself up on his elbows, sighing heavily, disappointed. *I must have scared her off.*

He inhaled, then froze in place, his eyes locking in on his slightly ajar bedroom door. He breathed in again, deeply. His flat was positively *rank* with the smell of coffee, bacon, and something bready. He grinned and swung himself out of bed, blindly following the smells out of the bedroom, hopping into a pair of boxers as he went.

Rupert had slept like shit. Firstly, he was drunk. *At this age, I should know better than to mix bubbles and whiskey.* Secondly, he was just generally miserable. Thirdly, he knew Cameron was enraged at him.

However, he did *not* get quite drunk enough to erase the images of Taggie and Bas, entwined on the terrace, from his mind. The one comfort he took from the evening was the light on in her room at the Priory when he arrived at home. Bas, the cad, had left her at home with her sister. That act of chivalry helped dissipate some of his rage at his friend. *At least Bas had some decency left* . Bas was the second-most notorious and degenerate rake in Cotchester. If Rupert was unworthy of Taggie, then Bas, by default, was also unworthy. He needed to make sure Bas understood that. He didn't necessarily feel the need to beat the shit out of him like he did last night (although more of that moral high ground eroded every time he remembered Bas's hand on Taggie's bare back, her dress all but off, as she straddled him on that stone wall), but he *needed* to make Bas understand that Taggie was off-limits. She was too good for the likes of them. Declan had been right on Valentine's Day when he told Rupert to stay away from her. And if that rule applied to Rupert, it surely also applied to Bas.

After what felt like hours of staring at the ceiling at Penscombe and strategically shifting his weight around the bed to test if Cameron was awake, Rupert slid out of bed and put on the first pants and shirt he could find, then went right to his car to drive to Bar Sinister. He knew it was early, and he looked a mess, not having showered, shaved or slept since the night before, but he *needed* to talk to Bas, to make him *understand.*

Cameron, her swollen eyes from crying, laid on her side, awake, facing the wall, as Rupert slid out of bed and got dressed. The idea that he was trying to be discreet only made her feel worse. Once he left the bedroom, she got out of bed and watched him get into the car and pull out of the driveway, driving toward Cotchester. She knew in her gut that he was going to see Bas, and she hated it. Her and Rupert's connection had felt so secure weeks ago, and now it felt like she had hallucinated the whole thing, like she was walking a tightrope, and she didn't understand why. She went downstairs to pour herself a coffee and a whiskey to take the edge off.

Taggie raided the Bar Sinister kitchen downstairs and in a neatly arranged stack she brought upstairs two mixing bowls that contained: eggs, pear jam, diced potatoes, a crumpet batter she had mixed, butter, bacon, and two large skillets.

Some time later, she was standing over the stove, finishing off the bacon and fried potatoes, when she heard a noise behind her. Bas was standing where the kitchen met the hallway, arms crossed, leaning against the doorframe, clad only in boxers, the same ones she wore. He was watching her intently, a very cheeky smile on his handsome face.

“Aren’t you industrious?

Taggie blushed and ducked her head, transferring both the bacon and fried potatoes to plates on the table.

“Can I help?” He asked.

“No. Sit.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

He pulled up a chair beside the stove and sat. “Nice threads” he quipped, gesturing at their matching boxers, eliciting a sincere laugh from both of them.

Bas watched, silently, as she poured whisked eggs into one pan, and in the other, she arranged crumpet molds in one of the pans and poured batter into them. The smell was absolutely divine. When she finished, there were freshly-made crumpets, an omelet with cheddar cheese and chives, fried potatoes, and bacon.

Taggie made as if to move past him and sit at the other end of the table, but he grabbed her around the waist, “Oh, no, no, no,” and pulled her backwards into his lap. He wrapped his arms around her, placing his chin on her shoulder, pressing his face into the hollow of her neck and inhaling deeply the scent of her freshly washed, still-damp hair.

The feeling of his face pressing into her neck sent a pleasant chill up her spine. He cut a corner off of the omelet with his fork and lifted it to her mouth. She laughed, opened her mouth, and chewed and swallowed. Bas served himself next. His chin still resting on her shoulder, he moaned as he chewed. “A revelation.”

Taggie stiffened, not unpleasantly. His moaning had a different effect on her this morning.

Taggie leaned forward and layered a tan-colored liquid, then pear jam on a fresh crumpet and lifted it to his mouth, meeting his eyes. Without breaking her gaze, he took an enthusiastic bite, leaving a spot of amber-colored jam at the corner of his mouth. Taggie, biting her bottom lip, reached out her thumb to gently wipe the jam away. Still holding his gaze, she put her thumb in her mouth, sucking the jam from it. She could feel him harden under her thigh as he watched her eagerly, releasing what was either a gasp or a very soft laugh. One of his thumbs slid inside the elastic waistband of her borrowed boxer shorts, softly stroking the bare skin under her belly button. She felt her nipples harden and a flash of warmth between her legs. She held her breath, her thumb still in her mouth. His dark and hot eyes on her, all she should think about was the square line of his jaw and how it felt to be tangled up with him last night—to have his hands and mouth on her. *Fuck all this food*, she thought.

The sound of a loud THUMP immediately drew both their eyes to the foyer, where they noticed a furtive humanoid figure directly in their line of sight.

Am I being fucking burgled?!? Bas thought, his eyes wide, tensing.

A few minutes earlier, Rupert had pulled his Aston Martin alongside the curb in front of Bar Sinister. He noticed Freddie standing at the front door of the Bar, knocking fruitlessly. *Fuck. So much for a private audience.*

"Freddie! What brings you here so bright and early?" Rupert called with a cheer and lightness he didn't feel.

Freddie smiled and waved, gesturing to the large case in his hand. "Bas asked for the karaoke machine for the Bar tonight, and I wanted to drop it off early. I—er—got plans for the rest of the day and wanted to have this done right off."

"What're *you* doing here, Rupe?"

"Oh, just needed to talk to Bas about something. Business for the next hunt." Rupert replied lamely, running one hand through his disheveled and greasy hair.

Freddie gave him a long, suspicious look but said nothing. Rupert remembered that Freddie had a frontrow seat to his worst behavior last night, and again he found himself feeling ashamed of himself. It was a relatively new and uncomfortable sensation that he was, frankly, quite sick of.

Freddie explained that he had been knocking at the Bar door for no less than 5 minutes with no response. Rupert led him around the corner to the stairway that went directly to Bas's apartment above the Bar. To Rupert's surprise, the exterior door was unlocked, and he led him and Freddie up the stairs. At the top of the stairs, Rupert raised his hand to knock, but noticed the door slightly ajar. *Unusual*. He pushed it open and walked into his friend's apartment, Freddie close on his heels. He was immediately bombarded with the smell of coffee, bacon, something bready. His stomach gurgled and clenched—he was both starving and wildly hungover, on the verge of being sick. He knew his way around Bas's apartment as if it was his own, and he confidently led Freddie down the hallway from the front entrance to the foyer, which was directly across from the kitchen. However, once Rupert gained a line of sight into the kitchen, he stopped short, so abruptly, in fact, that Freddie collided with his back and Rupert didn't even notice.

The tableau that greeted him made him sick. In front of the stove, Bas was seated in a wooden chair, dark hair rumpled, shirtless, and a full breakfast spread on the table in front of him. But that wasn't what riveted Rupert's attention. He felt all the air leave his body as he registered that Taggie was sitting on Bas's lap, hair wet, clearly the result of a recent shower, and she was wearing one of Bas's old jumpers. It was too large for her and one of her shoulders peeked through the askew neck-hole. His chest tightening, Rupert realized that she must have spent the night here. His mind raced, frantically trying to conjure platonic reasons why Taggie would need to spend the night here, shower here, wear Bas's clothes here.

Then it happened.

He saw Taggie lift what looked like a jam-covered crumpet to Bas's mouth, the two of them too engrossed with each other to notice that they were being watched. Rupert watched Bas take a bite from the pastry in Taggie's small, white hand. Then he watched her thumb reach out and wipe jam from the corner of Bas's mouth. When she put her thumb in her mouth and began to suck the jam off of it, her eyes still locked on Bas's, Bas looking like he would devour her whole, Rupert felt bile rise in his throat. He clapped his hand over his mouth, turned on his heel, and shoved past a shocked Freddie, down the stairs and out to the street. With one hand on the hood of his car to steady himself, Rupert bent over and vomited violently. As he spat to clear the bile from his mouth, leaning his forehead on the roof of his car, the image of Taggie, her hair wet, sucking on her thumb in that oversized green jumper, returned to his mind, vivid and unbidden.

He retched again.

Freddie stood, hunched over in the foyer, looking deeply embarrassed. When Rupert had shoved past him to sprint away, his shoulder had caught Freddie's, sending him and the karaoke case he carried slamming into the wall behind him. *So much for a covert exit.* Freddie cringed, as Taggie and Bas heard the clatter, both noticing and recognizing him. Freddie watched horror and embarrassment consume Taggie's face, while Bas breathed a sigh of relief, and his posture relaxed. *I'm not being burgled* , Bas thought with relief. Bas, ever shameless, was the first to break the silence, acting as if this was all perfectly normal, a friendly smile on his face, "Freddie! Have you come with the karaoke machine for tonight?"

Freddie, also breathing a small sigh of relief, directed his eyes everywhere except directly at the two of them. "YES. Yes. Yes. I brought the machine! The front was locked and this way was open, and I wanted to let you know it was here, and I'm SO sorry to interrupt." The shade of Freddie's blush matched Taggie's, who smiled weakly at him from Bas's lap.

Freddie set the machine on the floor in the hallway. "I'll just be on my way then," waving as he turned and nearly ran out of the flat, desperate to escape down the stairs.

"Freddie?" Bas called after him, his tone light, casual.

"Yeah?"

"Could you lock the doors behind you on the way out?"

Freddie grinned, "Absolutely." They heard the lock click into place behind him as he left the flat. Taggie and Bas sat in silence, frozen, until they could no longer hear his footsteps descending the steps.

Freddie emerged from the stairway, and true to his word, also locked the exterior door behind him. In front of him, Rupert was vomiting violently beside his car. While it was clear Rupert was clearly very hungover, Freddie suspected the reason for his vomiting was more to do with the scene upstairs than the combination of whiskey and champagne he had drank last night.

"You alright, mate?" Freddie asked, standing a safe distance away.

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Just had too much last night and the smell of all that food was just too much.” Another unsolicited image in his mind: Taggie’s wet hair nad (for some reason) the chunky texture and deep amber color of the jam on the surface of that fucking crumpet. The smell of bacon. *She fucking made him breakfast.*

Rupert dry heaved. He spat and attempted a weak smile for Freddie. “See? There, all out of my system.”

A final image: Taggie’s profile, sucking her thumb, Bas’s hungry eyes.

Rupert spun around and vomited again, barely missing his own shoes. “Christ,” he gasped.

Freddie offered Rupert a small smile, appraising him with a long look. Freddie’s look, his pity, made Rupert feel naked. He didn’t like it. He had spent his whole life being the Teflon Man, deflecting criticism, advice, hurt, accountability. But over the past few months, *since Taggie* , he felt like he was a one big open wound. He felt so vulnerable. It was strange, disorienting. He hated it.

Freddie got in his car and left, with a friendly wave and concerned look. Rupert got in his car. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” he whispered to himself, timing each “fuck” with a tap of his forehead against his steering wheel.

He knew he had been a massive shit. He had kissed Taggie, told her she was like air to him, then immediately moved in Cameron. He had ignored Taggie, insulted her. Eve without all of that, he knew it was wildly unfair of him to assume she would live like a nun, celibate, carrying a flame for him until the day when, *if* , he decided to finally make a play for her. And if he never did, what—she would live the rest of her life living in the Priory, catering Cotchester dinner parties? If anything, he *should* be happy that Taggie was getting her rocks off with someone as experienced as Bas. He *should* admire how determined she was to still go home with Bas after everything Rupert had done last night to ruin her night.

But “should” wasn’t enough—the sight of her with someone else— *touching* someone else —made him feel like his world was collapsing in on itself. A chill washed over him, a fear that she would be lost to him forever—a thought that terrified him more than anything. *It was that fear which had driven him to start this Venturer madness in the first place.* In the middle of his chest, finally, the nausea and heartburn gave way to a raw, bottomless ache. Finally, clinging to that ache as an anchor and distraction, he composed himself enough to begin the drive back to Penscombe.

Despite Freddie’s awkward interruption (neither of them had noticed Rupert), Taggie could still feel Bas’s semi-hard cock under her thigh—and she realized she was holding her breath. He also still had his thumb just inside the waistband of the boxers she wore, slowly sliding it along her bare skin, just below her navel. They sat that way for a few moments, in silence, except for the sound of their shallow breathing. Bas pressed his face into her hair, deeply sighing in a way that sounded more like a moan, his breath hot against her neck, sending shivers down her spine. Then, Bas slowly reached out, taking the jam-covered crumpet from her hand and setting it down on the table. “I think I have an idea for a different first course,” he whispered into her ear, as he stroked the inside of her wrist with this thumb.

Slowly, Taggie released a shaky breath and leaned back into him. “Yes, please,” she breathed, turning her head slightly to press her face into the hollow of his neck. Without another word, he slid a hand under her knees and stood up, carrying her back to his bedroom.

Bas dropped Taggie on her back onto his bed, and promptly she pulled his jumper over her head. Both naked from the waist up, Bas positioned himself between her legs, propping himself up on one elbow, his chest hovering a few inches above hers. With his other hand, he absentmindedly drew spirals with his index finger just below her collarbone. The morning sun streamed through the blinds—there was no darkness to hide in now. Taggie found this bright frankness both exhilarating and terrifying.

“I’d like to…” Bas gestured down toward her hips with his eyes, continuing to trace circles on her chest.

Taggie smiled weakly, her face flushed, furrowing her brow, unable to focus on anything other than the light touch of his finger on her bare skin. *They had already slept together last night, so why would he be asking, like this, now?*

Seeing her confusion, Bas grinned and slowly slid his long, pink tongue out of his mouth, wiggling it back and forth. Taggie felt herself blanch. *Now* she understood. She was too embarrassed to admit she had never had anyone do that before. The idea made her heart race with apprehension, but also inspired a hot, wet ache between her legs. *Yes, God, please.* However, all she managed to say was, “Ummm, I—”

Bas stopped drawing his circles and folded his hands between her breasts, resting his chin on them. He looked at her, suddenly very serious. “If you don’t like it, say the word, and I will stop?”

“Okay,” she whispered, breathless, looking down at him, her heart racing. Her body felt like it was on fire.

He grinned and lifted off of her to kneel at the foot of the bed. He grabbed her by her hips and pulled her towards him, aligning her hips with the edge of the bed. Not expecting that, her eyes widened, her hair fanning out above her head. She looked down the length of herself and caught his eye. She had never felt so exposed, but also so desperate to be touched. *I can’t look* , she thought, knowing and hating that she was turning the same shade of red as his crimson curtains. She tried to relax, looking up at the ceiling, as she felt him pull off her boxers and spread her legs, placing the backs of her thighs on his shoulders. When she felt his tongue touch her, she gasped. Her embarrassment somewhat assuaged, she looked down at him. He was looking up at her, waiting for her verdict.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered.

Just before she came the first time that morning, she propped herself up on her elbows. She felt like she was going to crush Bas’s head between her thighs. “Fuck,” she whimpered in what she knew was a small, pathetic tone. He looked up at her, his dark eyes gleaming. She reached for his hand, which was resting on her abdomen. She felt the tension building inside her, the firm, relentless rhythm of his tongue making her incapable of thought or speech. “FUCK, BAS,” she gasped, clenching his hand, her legs relaxing around his head, as the

warm, sweet uncoiling of an orgasm rippling through her. He lifted his mouth from her and rested his cheek on her inner thigh. Catching her eye, he laughed, squeezing her hand. She looked down at him and laughed, too, trying to catch her breath.

"Care to go again?" he asked, one eyebrow raised. She laughed and fell back on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. She closed her eyes and gasped when she felt his tongue on her again.

In the end, Taggie came three times in what she felt like had to be a shamefully short amount of time. In any case, Bas seemed very pleased with himself as he stood up, wiping his mouth on the back of his forearm, his boxer shorts converted to a tent by his erection.

The edges of everything seemed soft and Taggie's limbs felt like they were made of lead, but in the best possible way. She pulled Bas on top of her and slid his boxer shorts down over his hips, enjoying the feel of him on top of her, his hardness pressed between their bodies. She wrapped her legs around his waist and tangled both of her hands in his hair, kissing him deeply. She slid her tongue into his mouth, tasting pear jam, bacon, and something else—*herself* . She tightened her legs around his waist and pressed her hips into him, and he groaned happily into her mouth.

She shifted out from under him, and reached for the nightstand, pulling out a condom.

"Making yourself right at home?" he teased, as she rolled it over him.

"I like to make myself useful," she replied, her voice a husky whisper, her eyes bright. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and pulled his head down to kiss her with one hand while with the other, she guided him inside of her.

While she was in no danger of coming for a *fourth* time that morning, it was still delicious . She loved the feeling of him inside her, how his strong hands slid under her to adjust her under him. Bas ran his hands over her, as they moved together in a slow, grinding rhythm. When his thumbs paused to run softly over her hardened nipples, her whole body felt *alive* . She lightly ran her nails down his back, and felt very pleased with herself when she felt him shiver under her touch and moan into her neck. Every other thrust, his gold chain tapped her under her chin, which made them both laugh. When she felt his back tense under her hands, she tangled her hands in his hair and pulled him down to kiss her as he came, moaning her name into her mouth, both of his hands on her hips, holding her tightly against him. He sighed and settled into her, pressing his forehead to hers as they grinned at each other, eyes bright, sated. *If this is what casual sex is like, I can understand why it's so popular. I don't know how anyone does anything else* , Taggie thought.

"I'm so happy your date cancelled on you," Taggie whispered.

They both laughed, as he lifted himself off of and out of her, and their stomachs growled in unison.

They ended up reheating all the food in Bas's microwave. He suggested they take it all to the living room, where there was a deep and luxurious looking sofa and a coffee table

arranged in front of the television. Bas draped himself on one end of the sofa, his back against one of the arms, propped up by some pillows, his legs stretched out along its length. Taggie sat herself rather awkwardly at the other end. Bas looked at her with a furrowed brow, a crumpet held in his mouth, shaking his head, gesturing with both of his hands for her to come toward him.

"Uh-uh, no, come here," he mumbled around the crumpet.

She slid towards him, and with both of his hands, he pulled her backwards into him, so she was positioned on her back, between his legs, her back pressed against his chest, the top of her head just below his chin. He wrapped one arm around her waist and with the other took the crumpet out of his mouth.

"Much better."

She laughed and rolled onto her stomach to look up at him, wondering if he was trying to seduce her again. He looked down at her, his face open, almost innocent, chewing away on his crumpet—nothing leading in his look at all. Intuiting what she was thinking, he made a mock-horrified face and laughed, talking with his mouth full, "Christ, Tag. I *am* still human after all. A man's body, even this fine specimen, has its limits. And you're the last person I would have expected to resent a cuddle."

She laughed, rolling to her side, her cheek resting on his chest. She reached for a piece of bacon.

"Okay, Tag, but seriously, what in the world *is* this? It's absolutely divine, and I know it had to come from my kitchen, but I have no idea how," he said, holding the crumpet she had fed him earlier in his hand and waving it in front of her face.

She grinned. "It's the butter. It's toasted. Then, paired with a light jam or marmalade, it tastes like caramel or nuts."

"Butter. Toasted." Bas said, his expression flat, his dark eyes staring into her blue ones, clearly not understanding. "Like in the toaster?"

Taggie laughed and shook her head. Leaning forward, she swirled her pinky finger in the dish of still-liquid, amber, browned butter on the coffee table. She held her pinky to Bas's mouth. When he leaned forward, taking her finger into his mouth and wrapping his tongue around it, Taggie curled her toes and bit her bottom lip. Bas's face, still friendly, open, devoid of any amorous intentions, looked at her as she withdrew her finger, a barely perceptible tremor in her hand. "Butter? How in God's name did you turn butter into *that?*"

"You cook it in a pan until it looks and smells right."

Bas shook his head, "Witchcraft," he said, shoving the last of that crumpet into his mouth and reaching for another, slathering it in both melted brown butter and pear jam. Taggie picked up a fork and stabbed as many fried potatoes as possible with it.

As he chewed and swallowed, he looked down at her, his face serious. "I don't mean to constantly harass you about it, Tag, but I really *would* hire you in a heartbeat to take over the Bar Sinister kitchen. Hear me out—first off, I would hire basically anyone competent to replace Louie. He really is a *toad* (said with a tone of sincere disgust that made Taggie laugh). But secondly, Tag, you are really incredible. I mean it. And I think with the right chef, Bar

Sinister could be something really special. You could have complete creative control of the kitchen, the menu. You could even use the kitchen to keep catering if you wanted." He took another bite and swallowed. "There, I've said my piece. I'll leave it there."

Taggie felt her cheeks heat, not used to such direct compliments. She rested her head on his chest. "I do appreciate it, Bas, it's just…"

"What?"

She rolled over onto her stomach to look up at him. "Before we moved here, I worked in the restaurant of a family friend in London, and I loved it, I really did. It's just that with kitchens, there's so much—I don't really—especially if you are the chef—." She pressed her hands to either side of her face, looking at him with a distressed, shamefaced expression and sighed. "I'm basically fucking illiterate, Bas. I can cook, taste, season, experiment, *create* . But working in that specific role comes with a whole host of administrative responsibilities that I simply can't do. *That's* why I can't take this job."

Bas's face was pensive as he looked up at the ceiling, absently twirling a piece of her hair in his fingers. "Moriah, she was new last Valentine's Day when you helped me out with the curry—she is Louie's second in command—absolutely hates his guts, too. If, hypothetically, you took Louie's job, we could do some shuffling downstairs—Moriah could take on more of the kitchen administration, leaving you to do more of the culinary piece. She's got a mind like a steel trap and runs circles around me with the books as it is, but the 'food' part of the kitchen is not her forte—not yet."

Taggie stared long and hard at Bas. Normally, she would assume this type of offer in these circumstances was empty flattery—these offers of accommodation, employment, particularly from someone of Bas's reputation, would be just a way to get into her knickers. But he had already *thoroughly* explored her knickers, and he was still offering the job.

Bas noticed her narrowed eyes, and he tilted his head to the side, surprised at the sudden suspicion clouding Taggie's expression. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just thinking that I don't really understand you. This is the type of offer I would expect *before* last night, not after. It seems too good to be true."

Bas sighed with obvious relief. "Oh GOD, Tag. Sex is just for fun. It doesn't *mean* anything," he said, waving his hands dismissively. 'But business, that is *very* serious. I want to hire you because you're the best.' With that, he reached for yet another crumpet, electing to dip the entire flat surface into the browned butter dish. As he shook the dripping excess back into the bowl, he turned to look at her with a sly look. "I don't mean to offend, Tag, but I don't need to resort to false promises of employment or empty flattery to lure young maidens to my lair."

Taggie beamed up at him. "I know. I saw the shower. And the guest closet." They both laughed. She reached for a crumpet, sloppily dipping it in the butter as he had. She looked up at him with bright eyes and a soft smile on her face. "I'll think about it."

Bas smiled, his mouth full again, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I'll take it."

They passed the morning like that, tangled up in each other on the sofa, grazing on Taggie's breakfast spread. Bas clicked through channels, and they ended up watching reruns of Four Men Went to Mow. They both dissolved into hysterics when they noticed one episode's central female villain was wearing the same dress/necklace combination Taggie had worn the night before.

They both fell asleep at various points—Bas, with a half-eaten crumpet in his open hand, resting on the coffee table. Taggie removed the crumpet from his hand and put it on a plate, gently settling back into him with a small smile. When Bas noticed she was asleep, he gently brushed her hair back from her face and tangled his hand in it.

Eventually, Bas had to go check on the Bar downstairs, as it was nearly time to open for lunch service. Taggie also needed to get back to the Priory before she was missed.

Taggie was going to leave her dress here to be sent back to Corinium before it was missed, so she put together a very chic outfit in her size—new Levis, a black silk blouse—from Bas's guest closet. When she came out of the guest room, she found Bas waiting for her in the hall. He let out a low whistle when he saw her.

"Your flings have great taste," she teased. "I can bring this all back later. This outfit is worth at least a hundred pounds."

Bas held up his hands as trying to ward off the very suggestion, "God, no. Whenever these clothes leave and don't come back, I feel as if I've exorcised a hostile spirit from the flat. Please keep them." He stepped past her, seeing his green jumper folded on the guest bed. "Take this, too. You wear it much better than I ever did." Taggie took it, tying it around her waist.

They stopped to pick up a Chinese takeaway on the way back to the Priory, as Taggie suspected that neither Caitlin nor her father would have fed themselves and both of them were likely hungover. Bas insisted on paying for it, a gesture which Taggie also accepted. While Taggie looked forward to seeing Caitlin, those hours in Bas's flat had felt like they were outside of time. She had been sincerely happy and had forgotten reality for a while. She wished it didn't have to end.

As they drove, the summer morning was warm and sunny, and Bas had the windows down, blowing her hair around her face. She took one hand off the hot paper bag in her lap and gave Bas's thigh a friendly squeeze. He tipped his head down to smile and wink at her from above his sunglasses. She laughed and put a hand out the open window, closing her eyes. For once in her life, she felt her age. *This is what 20 should feel like* .

The gravel crunched under Bas's car's tires as he stopped just short of the Priory—Taggie had asked to be dropped away from the house so she could approach on foot, rather than having to explain Bas's late morning drop-off. Taggie sighed, her head tipped back against the headrest. She looked over at him, a small smile on her face. "Thank you. For everything. It was a lovely 16 hours."

"It was quite literally my pleasure." He leaned forward and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek, then took off his sunglasses to look at her seriously, his dark eyes searching hers. "But do think on it—ousting Louie. Come by literally anytime to see the kitchen, chat with Moriah."

Taggie gave him a bemused smile. “Yeah, I’ll think on it.” She got out of the car.

He beamed, putting his sunglasses back on. “Come back tonight if you fancy some karaoke!” he called through the open window, as he peeled out. She laughed as she watched him speed off. He was handsome, charming, but also shockingly guileless sometimes. There was something very endearing about it. She walked toward the house, her head down, smiling to herself, when she heard a squeal from the front door. Caitlin was standing in the open doorway, literally bouncing with glee. ‘DID YOU SHAG HIM??’ She whispered, eyes wide, placing Taggie’s arm in a vice-grip. Taggie bit her bottom lip and grinned, meeting her sister’s eyes. She nodded slowly. Caitlin squealed and threw her arms around Taggie, nearly making her drop the takeaway bag. “EEEEEEEEEEE, I’m so PROUD OF YOU!!!!”

“Caitlin!!! Mind that racket! You’ll wake your sister!” Declan bellowed from upstairs.

Taggie gave Caitiln a confused look, at which Caitlin rolled her eyes. “I told Daddy you were hungover and very sick and he was not to disturb you under any circumstances. He has no idea you never came home last night. It probably helped that I loudly barfed all over the bathroom last night. It helped sell your alibi. Now, come on, let’s eat this, and I want all the gory details.” Taggie let her sister drag her into the kitchen.

Taggie began to unpack the bag. As if summoned by the smell, Declan appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, disheveled, in the same wrinkled shirt and pants that he had been wearing all week. He looked surprised to see Taggie looking so put together. “Tag? You look much better than you sounded last night,” he said with a chuckle, absently kissing her on the cheek. “I always liked that blouse, looks good on you. This smells bloody amazing.” Declan heaped himself a plate and wandered out of the kitchen, back upstairs. Both sisters rolled their eyes.

Determined, Caitlin badgered the details of the previous hours out of Taggie.

“TWICE?! You shagged him TWICE?” Caitlin sat back in her chair, shaking her head in happy disbelief. She leaned forward and whispered, ‘Did you cum both times?’ Taggie could feel the blush crawling up her neck as she held her sister’s gaze and held up all five fingers on her right hand. Caitlin looked from Taggie’s face to her hand, then back to her face. Finally putting it together, she slammed her fork down on the table and squealed again. “Tag, you DIRTY DOG.” Still shaking her head, a grin covering the bottom half of her face, Caitlin began to shovel stir-fry noodles into her mouth, talking with her mouth full. “Tag, I have never been more proud of you, and you know that I am always *very* proud of you.”

Suddenly, she dropped her fork in her plate, and looked at Taggie with big eyes. “OH, Tag, I nearly forgot. Can you take me to Bar Sinister tonight for the karaoke party???”

Taggie grimaced slightly, remembering that she *had* snogged Bas Baddingham in full view of the entire Ball. She didn’t want to look desperate or clingy to the rest of the gathering.

Caitlin saw her sister’s hesitation and began to beg, “Oh Tag, PLEASE??? Archie rang while you were off in your love nest, and he’s going, and it’s my last chance to see him before I’m back off to school tomorrow!! PLEASE?”

Taggie took a deep breath, closing her eyes. *She could do this for her sister, especially after she covered for her with their father.* “Fine.”

Caitlin clapped her hands together in joy and went back to inhaling her noodles. Then, she paused, briefly, noodles hanging from her mouth, and grinned wickedly at Taggie. “Maybe you’ll need to start using both hands to count your Bas orgasms.”

Taggie threw a napkin at her sister, a shy but self-satisfied smile on her lips.

5. A New Gig

At Penscombe, the morning after the Hunt Ball, Cameron had paced back and forth in the parlor, a copy of *Vogue* lying open and unread. Rupert had sped off half an hour earlier, and she knew he was heading for the Priory or to Bas's flat. Either way, Cameron knew it was all about Taggie O'Hara. Taggie—someone she had never spared an extra thought for, but on whom Rupert was clearly fixated. Cameron began to chew her nails as she paced, then froze as she heard the crunch of gravel. Rupert was back. *He could barely make it to Cotchester and back in that amount of time* , she thought with a sigh of relief.

When she saw Rupert's face as he entered the house, her heart sank. His face was green, like he was about to vomit. He looked haggard, defeated, slumped. With some alarm, she thought he looked on the verge of tears. She felt a flood of sympathy and silently reached for him, intending to take him into her arms and comfort him. Without looking at her, he held up his hands and walked past her, into the room with the television, followed by his eager pack of dogs. Cameron felt a pang in her heart and tears prick in her eyes. *What in the fuck?*

An hour later, she crept up to the doorway of the room, where Rupert had retreated. He was surrounded by the dogs, all of whom were sleeping at his feet. The film Lassie was playing on the television, but Rupert wasn't watching. His face was in his hands, and he was sobbing inconsolably.

Cameron had never seen him so vulnerable, and it stirred something soft within her. She ached to hold him, comfort him. But she thought back to the previous evening, Taggie O'Hara's fiery eyes and rage as she shoved him, stumbling backwards, down the hallway. Cameron suspected this present misery was due to him being heartsick for someone else. That sent a shard of ice into her warm heart. *Fuck, I need to get out of this house.* She recalled Freddie mentioning last night, while Rupert was off sulking, that there was going to be karaoke at Bar Sinister tonight. Cameron felt a new sense of appreciation for Bas Baddingham and by default, for Bar Sinister. Cameron had seen the way he had kissed Taggie on the dance floor. She had also seen the way Taggie had beamed up at him afterward and pulled him back in. She also recalled the state of undress Taggie had been in, coming in from the terrace, also attributable to the younger Baddingham. Maybe Bas would lay claim to the ingénue and take her off of Cotchester's menu of available women. Then Rupert would *have* to let her go. Cameron hated feeling like this—unsure of herself, insecure. She went back to her issue of *Vogue* and poured herself a whiskey, the warmth of the brown liquid blurring the sharp edges of the ache in her chest.

True to her word, Taggie took Caitlin to the Bar Sinister for the karaoke night. Taggie also took the garment bag containing Caitlin's dress from the ball.

As they walked in the door, the party had clearly already started—Freddie was taking the first turn at the mic, this time choosing Kenny Loggins' Danger Zone. A crowd gathered around the stage. Caitiln bee-lined from Taggie's side, without a word, right for Archie,

standing in the corner. Left alone, Taggie slowly attempted to slide around the corner of the entry hallway, to find a dark corner in which to sit and sip a pint with the garment bag, until she could catch Bas's eye and hand it over to him. God knows how long Caitiln wanted to stay, snogging Archie. Sighing, Taggie rounded the corner, immediately colliding with a solid body that smelled like sage and cigarettes—Bas.

"Tag! I had hoped you'd come!" he beamed. He looked down at the garment bag, awkwardly pressed between them. "Caitlin's?"

Taggie nodded, silent, suddenly feeling very awkward. She was very annoyed to feel herself blushing. She felt very brazen, still wearing the clothes from Bas's fling closet, coming back to his bar, with the dress he had lent her sister.

Without missing a beat, as if this was just another day and the previous day had never happened, Bas took the bag from her, folding it over his arm. He pointed her back toward the bar. "I want you to chat with Moriah. I went over everything with her this afternoon, and she's very keen."

Bas's complete lack of awkwardness or acknowledgement in his words, posture, tone, *anything* , of the night before, again, surprised Taggie, but also heartened her. It was fine, everything was fine. "*Sex is just for fun, it doesn't mean anything* ," she remembered. She laughed in spite of herself. *Come on, Agatha. Get out of your own head. Last night for Bas was less than you trying a new recipe.*

Bas led her to the bar, behind which a tall, blonde girl, seemingly near her own age, stood drying pint glasses. Taggie vaguely remembered her from Valentine's Day when she had helped Bas by making an emergency curry. This must be Moriah—Taggie remembered her being friendly, competent, with a cutting sense of humor and very new to the kitchen. Seeing her again, Taggie recalled that she had quite liked Moriah—she reminded her of Caitlin. Upon noticing Bas with Taggie in tow, Moriah's face lit up. "I'll leave you two to it," Bas said in a light tone, as he sauntered away, bag in hand.

Moriah put the glass down and leaned forward on the bar, her chin in her hands, with a twinkle in her eye and a smirk on her lips. "Bas tells me he's been plotting a coup for the kitchen, and you're our fearless general. As usual, Louie the Pig is 'out sick,' so let's talk battle plans."

The more they talked, the more Taggie admired Moriah—she was sharp, clever, and clearly understood how to run a kitchen. Moriah's goal was to run her own place one day, although by her own admission she still had a lot to learn when it came to the "cooking part" of a kitchen. She could follow a recipe, but she understood that to truly cook well, there was a different level of understanding, theory even, that was necessary. She didn't have that and Louie would never be able (or willing) to teach her. He was an arsehole who was more interested in perving on every woman who crossed his path. Moriah was the last remaining female staff member in the Bar, kitchen or otherwise. She had thought about quitting and looking for work elsewhere, but she liked Bas, and she knew he would be thoroughly fucked without her.

Moriah, for her part, also remembered Taggie from Valentine's Day; she had instantly liked her—in particular, her kindness and patience, but mostly the way in which she had smelled, frowned, stirred, tasted her way through preparing a massive amount of curry,

creating something that was both beautiful *and* delicious. *This is someone I could learn from* . So when Bas had approached her that afternoon as she was opening (as usual, Louie had no-showed on a theme night, leaving her to manage alone), saying he had an idea for how to oust Louie and bring in Taggie, Moriah had been thrilled.

Within the space of 10 minutes, in between pouring beers for the waiters working that night, Moriah had essentially convinced Taggie to take over the Bar Sinister kitchen. Taggie blushed as Moriah very systematically outlined her strengths (despite only cooking with her once) compared to Louie, ending with "It's foolproof," as she poured Taggie a pint of beer. Taggie's flush deepened, the familiar shame burning in her cheeks. "Yes, but, I don't think you know that I—I'm—"

"Dyslexic?"

"Yes," Taggie whispered.

Moriah waved her hand dismissively, pouring herself a pint. "Bas already explained that. My younger brother is dyslexic, and I'm very familiar—read books, practiced all kinds of skills—don't give that part another thought. I'm not concerned. And I view this as a good partnership: I help you with the administrative portions, and you teach me how to cook. I mean, *really* cook. It works for both of us."

"Are you sure? It wouldn't be a burden or annoy you?" Taggie wasn't used to being accommodated like this—more familiar to her was scorn, often from her own mother.

Moriah rolled her eyes. "Christ, woman. I'm already doing all of that anyway, and for someone who I fundamentally despise. No, it would sincerely be my pleasure."

The two of them shared a conspiratorial look, and laughed. They looked back toward the stage area of the bar, where someone else had taken the mic, doing a very off-key rendition of Toto's Africa. Bas was standing on the edge of the crowd, watching the performance, his arm around a petite woman with a blonde pixie cut, who was glued to his side.

"Plus, the Boss isn't hard on the eyes. Another perk," Moriah added with a wink, nudging Taggie with her elbow across the bar.

Taggie laughed as she watched the blonde pull him down to whisper in his ear and run her hand over his chest, "No, no he really is not." *Not even a new recipe—more like an extra dash of salt.* "I think I might actually be most of the way to a 'yes,' which I didn't think was possible."

Moriah gave a cheer.

Suddenly, a voice, thick with panic, screamed through the kitchen double doors behind the bar:

"MORIAH——HELP!"

Moriah sighed deeply, rolling her eyes. She put her towel down behind the bar.

"Do you need extra hands?" Taggie asked.

"Jesus, not even on payroll yet and so eager." Moriah teased.

Taggie grinned. “I only came to bring my little sister, and God knows I won’t see her for hours. I’d rather help.”

“Oh, come on then. You can see the fresh hell I’m trying to drag you into.”

Bas felt a tug on the sleeve of his shirt. He peeled himself away from his very keen blonde companion to see his nephew, Archie, looking very flushed and mildly shamefaced, Caitlin O’Hara standing behind him, looking much the same.

Bas smirked at Archie, “Yes?”

“I was wondering if—if maybe—could—could we borrow your flat?”

Bas, knowing he was being an ass, chose to give Archie a blank, confused face. Archie began to sputter. *Christ, he’s blushing worse than Taggie this morning,* Bas thought. “We just—we don’t have *anywhere* to go! You don’t remember what it’s like to be young—”

Bas laughed. “Arch—use the back door, up that way. The key is under the mat.”

Archie’s desperate face froze, then exploded into a delighted grin. “THANK YOU,” he whispered. He grabbed Caitiln, and the two of them sprinted for the back stairs. The blonde woman stood on her tiptoes to whisper into Bas’s ear, “What was that about?”

“Young love,” Bas said, causing them both to dissolve into laughter.

Back at Penscombe, Cameron, not wanting to confront Rupert’s mood head-on, called out from the next room, “I’m heading to Cotchester. There’s karaoke at Bar Sinister, and I feel like getting out of the house.” Without waiting for a reply, she left.

When she arrived, she was disappointed to see Bas whispering conspiratorially and engaging in some light petting with a petite, chic blonde. However, there was no sign of Agatha O’Hara, and that was enough for her.

Taggie and Moriah passed through the double swinging doors into the kitchen. It was chaos. The two young line cooks Moriah had left in charge while she worked the bar—Marty and Joey—had managed to not only scorch but somehow also light on fire the mash on top of two large pans of shepherd’s pie that were in one of the kitchen’s two industrial ovens.

The oven door was open, and Marty was frantically fanning the flaming pie with his apron, clearly trying to dissipate the smoke and extinguish the flames, but only succeeding in fanning the flames. Joey was standing on the other side of the kitchen, both of his hands on his head, his mouth hanging open in horror, his eyes bugging out of his face.

Moriah gaped at the spectacle in front of her. “FUCK, MARTY! I LEFT YOU ALONE FOR TEN MINUTES! HOW COULD THIS EVEN HAPPEN?!” Snapping herself out of her shock, Moriah grabbed a fire extinguisher and sprayed the trays, eliminating the flames and source of smoke, but spraying foam all over the oven and floor. Taggie laughed and rolled up

the sleeves of her borrowed silk blouse. If there was anything she knew, it was how to operate in a crisis. “Let’s get to work.”

Taggie passed the next few hours in the kitchen, thoroughly enjoying herself. While one of the ovens was out of commission until it could cool down and be thoroughly cleaned, there was a second oven. Taggie assessed the ingredients in the cooler and shelves and realized that they had plenty of ingredients for a steak and ale pie that she could prepare in the other oven. Delegating tasks to the 3 Bar Sinister employees, she pulled an apron over her head and settled in. She was in her element.

Back at Penscombe, Rupert knew he was being a total shit. To Cameron. To Taggie. To himself. He knew Cameron had left for Cotchester hours ago, and he should go—make a showing. But he remembered the events of last night, and he felt a burning, painful emotion, one that had largely been foreign to him—shame. He didn’t want to face Bas. But more than that, he didn’t want to face Taggie. She had been right. *He had no right.* He was a hypocrite, a top-shelf arsehole. And more selfishly, after the events of this morning, he had absolutely no desire to see Taggie and Bas together, reenacting some type of domestic bliss. He knew that was just cowardice. He was a complete cad, worse than Bas, and Cameron deserved better—Taggie deserved better.

He splashed water on his face and changed his clothes. He *would* go to Bar Sinister. He *would* have a good time. He would make it up to Cameron. And he would leave Bas and Taggie alone, even if it felt like drinking acid.

He got into his Astin Martin and drove toward Cotchester in the dark and his mind anywhere but on the road. As he approached the city limits, his lights illuminated a car pulled off on the side of the road. As he got closer, he realized it was Bas’s car. As he passed, he noticed that the windows were completely fogged over, and he noticed a small white hand, pressed against the back window, the only break in the fogged surface. He kept driving, but felt rage rapidly crescendoing inside of him. He had passed maybe half a kilometer beyond the car when he hit his brakes and cranked his steering wheel around, pulling a sharp U-turn across the road. All of his previous goodwill, resignation now out the window. *How dare he. Fucking Tag like some kind of whore on the side of the road when he had a fucking flat above the Bar. How fucking dare he he was going to drag Bas out of that car and kill him.*

Rupert screeched to a halt on the shoulder across the road from Bas’s car, leaving his car running and the lights on. As he stalked across the road, he noticed that Bas’s car was rocking from side to side, which enraged him even more. His blood pounded in his ears as he reached for the back door on the driver’s side of Bas’s car and ripped it open.

His eyes immediately registered on the naked body of a short-haired blonde woman, who promptly covered her breasts with her hands and began screaming hysterically. Under her, Bas, naked from the knees up, looked up and back at him, in utter shock. “CHRIST! RUPERT??? WHAT THE FUCK?”

Rupert stood, frozen, for a moment, then slammed the door shut. *It wasn’t Taggie. Bas wasn’t with Taggie* . He was flooded with relief *and* remorse. He trotted back to his car, hoping to make a quick escape, when he heard the slam of Bas’s car door behind him, and he

felt his friend's hand grab his arm and spin him around. Bas stood before him, shirtless, holding his pants up with one hand.

"What the ACTUAL FUCK, Rupert? WHAT. THE. FUCK. What's *wrong* with you??"

"I-I-I'm sorry, I thought that-I thought—"

Bas threw his arms up in the air in exasperation. (His pants, no longer held up by his hands, fell down around his ankles, leaving him standing in the middle of the road clad in only his boxers.) "What?!? You thought WHAT?? I was ravishing Taggie on the side of the road, and you thought you'd swoop in like some white knight and, what, preserve her virtue??"

Rupert gaped at him, not expecting such directness. He had no quip, no clever deflection. *That was exactly what he had planned to do.* In another unpleasant turn of events, Rupert felt himself start to blush.

Bas pointed his index finger at Rupert, his hair a mess, his eyes wild. "You—you're fucking DERANGED."

When Rupert said nothing in response, Bas stared at him in exasperated disbelief. Pants still around his ankles, Bas clapped both hands to the top of his head. "God knows I love you, mate, but GET A FUCKING GRIP. You eye-fuck Taggie for months, MONTHS. Then what do you do? You fucking move in Cameron and act like she doesn't even exist. Then even though *you* refuse to touch her, when you see someone else touch her, you act like some kind of wild fucking animal."

Rupert still said nothing. Bas dropped his arms to his sides, giving his friend a long, pitying look. "Christ, man, God knows I'm no genius, but it's clear as fucking day—either drop Cameron and make a real move for Taggie, or just leave Taggie the *fuck* alone and let her live her life. She deserves at *least* that much."

The two friends stared at each other in the middle of the dark road, in silence. "You're right. I'm sorry," Rupert finally whispered. He turned to walk back to his car, then stopped in the middle of the road, turning back, "And I'm sorry for last night. I had no right."

"You know as well as I do that it's not me that you need to apologize to." Bas bent over, pulled up his trousers, and returned to his car, buckling his belt as he walked.

Rupert took a deep breath, got back into his car, and continued into Cotchester, his hands shaking on the wheel. Bas was right. He had lost his mind.

Bas and the blonde, Caroline (now clothed), drove back to Cotchester in tense silence. Bas had apologized, but the mood was ruined. He parked his car in front of the Bar Sinister, beside Taggie's car, he noted with chagrin. He noticed Rupert's car was also parked in front.

"Look, I'm sorry, darling," Bas offered across the front seat.

Caroline gave him a sour look and got out of the car in silence. Bas watched her stalk to her car, get in, and drive off. He sighed and went back into the Bar Sinister. As he walked through the door, he was greeted with an air of joy—the Cotchester folk were singing their

drunken hearts out on and around the stage, still working their way through the Top Gun soundtrack. *At least someone's having a good night.* Even Cameron and Rupert were in a corner booth, embracing, and seemingly making up. Bas and Rupert's eyes met and Rupert offered his friend a short nod. Bas gave him a small smile and disappeared back to the bar. He saw two full pints sitting on the bar, with no sight of Moriah or Taggie. *Waste not, want not.* He promptly chugged both unattended pints. He then walked around the bar to wash the glasses, rolling up his shirtsleeves. As he dried the glasses and placed them on a shelf, Charles Fairburn came up to the bar.

"Bas, this steak pie is DIVINE. I don't know what you've done to your cook, but you've clearly whipped him into shape."

Throwing the towel over his shoulder, Bas walked into the kitchen. "Moriah, we need someone out at the bar, and I thought we had agreed that it would be shepherd's pie, not—"

He stopped short.

In front of him was Taggie. Her black silk blouse was sprayed with flour as she rolled out a massive sheet of pastry, presumably the crust for the steak pie. Moriah stirred a massive pot on the stove, which smelled divine. Marty and Joey were frantically chopping carrots and celery and potatoes, barely missing their fingers with the knives. In a first, everyone in the kitchen seemed to be working together in harmony. Bas leaned against the doorframe, taking in the scene.

Moriah looked at him archly. "Shepherd's pie, eh? Go ahead, take that out and serve that." She motioned with her eyes to a pan that looked like it was filled with charcoal, still smoldering, and covered with what seemed to be foam. Bas grimaced, and both Moriah and Taggie laughed.

With one hand still stirring the pot and the other on her hip, Moriah looked at Bas, an impish smile on her lips. "While I was out working the bar, Marty and Joey torched the shepherd's pie. Thank God Taggie was here. She jumped into action and saved the day. She cobbled together the leftover beef cuts and the vegetable scraps to make a pie that everyone is raving over. We've left the waiters to take orders and run the bar, as we've had to start the dinner service from scratch."

Taggie beamed up at Bas, and he knew it was nothing to do with him. She was clearly in her element, and her joy was contagious—even bringing harmony to a kitchen staff that was notoriously miserable. Bas walked over to Moriah, grabbed a spoon, and dipped it into the simmering mahogany liquid (clearly the gravy for the pies), and held it to his lips. The flavor was deep and rich, it tasted of beef, garlic, onion, sage, and he thought he detected a hint of port.

He turned around and saw Taggie, watching him, a half-smile on her face. "What? No moaning? Does this mean it doesn't pass muster?" She asked.

Bas laughed, tossing the spoon into the sink. "When can you start?"

Taggie looked over at Moriah, then back at Bas, with a pert smile. "Monday?"

Bas's eyes lit up, He grabbed Taggie and pulled her in, kissing her full on the mouth. She pulled away, breathless, surprised. Again, nothing seductive in his manner. *He would*

probably have done the same to Joey.

Bas rubbed his hands together, grinning, then looked at her very seriously. “You do mean it?”

Taggie nodded and smiled.

“YES! Okay, today is Saturday. I’ll break the news to Louie tomorrow night. I’ll offer him notice, but I expect he will walk off the job immediately, so you should be able to actually start on Monday. Can you come back tomorrow morning, both of you,” he looked at Moriah, “and we can strategize?”

Moriah and Taggie both nodded, smiling at each other.

Bas’s dark eyes were crackling with excitement. “This calls for a toast!” He left the kitchen and returned with a bottle of champagne, popping the cork and spraying it all over his end of the kitchen. Joey and Marty sighed, knowing they would have to mop that up later. “Everyone bring a glass! Those sods out there can bugger off for a few minutes. FUCK LOUIE!”

As Taggie finished up the last tray-sized steak pie and slid it into the oven, Moriah took a sip of champagne standing next to Bas. They both were watching Taggie’s floury form tidy the other end of the kitchen. “She really is brilliant,” Moriah said.

“Yes, she is,” Bas agreed.

“She’s also lovely,” Moriah added with a wink.

Not missing a beat, Bas winked right back. “Yes, she *is* .”

Moriah filled a flute and took it to Taggie, who took it, her floury and buttery hands from the pastry smudging the glass. *Caitlin was going to* ***die*** *when she told her* , she thought with relish.

Caitlin and Archie emerged from Bas’s flat after most of the party had already left. The kitchen had long been closed and everyone had left except for Monica Baddingham and Taggie. The three of them had a polite, but awkward conversation, until finally the two young lovers descended from the back stairs, looking very flushed and disheveled.

Monica greeted Archie with a straight face and firmly suggested they leave, unflappable as always. Archie, flushing a deep red, mumbled goodbye to Taggie and Bas, and stopped at the doorway, pausing to give Caitiln a long and meaningful look before raising his hand in a small, dramatic wave. Caitlin sighed and returned his gesture. Taggie put her arm around her sister, a bemused smile on her face. *This feels like a juvenile production of Wuthering Heights.*

Taggie and Caitiln headed for the door, and Bas walked them out. Caitiln, despite the circumstances, seemed to feel no embarrassment. She looked pertly from Bas to her sister with a wide grin.

“Come in at 8 tomorrow? I’ll have Moriah come in then, too, and we can plan before we open. Come right up to the flat.” Bas said to Taggie.

“I’ll see you then,” Taggie said with a small smile. “I’ll come right after I drop Caitiln at the station.”

“8? Meet here? Who’s Moriah?” Caitiln lowered her voice to a whisper. “Are you planning a threesome??”

Taggie began coughing, seemingly choking on the air she was trying to inhale, and Bas started laughing, opening the door for them. “Unfortunately not. However, it *does* seem that my sexual favors may have convinced your sister to come work for me.”

“TAGGIE, OH MY GOD!” Caitiln grabbed her sister’s arm and pulled her onto the sidewalk. ‘YOU NEED TO TELL ME EVERYTHING.’ Laughing, Taggie turned and gave Bas a wave as Caitiln dragged her down the sidewalk. “See you tomorrow.”

“So do you and Bas have a ‘thing’ now?” Caitiln asked, standing beside her suitcase on the train platform, early the next morning.

Taggie blushed. “No, definitely not. It was just a one-time thing. He went off with someone else last night.” She met her sister’s eyes with a smirk. “You know, Caitiln, sex can be fun and casual and not *mean* anything. What about you and Archie, do *you* have a ‘thing’ now?” Taggie teased, as Caitlin’s train pulled into the station.

“Oh, definitely. We’re going to write letters from school like star-crossed Victorian lovers.” Caitiln grinned, picking up her suitcase. “I hope you continue to have *lots* of ‘fun’ that ‘doesn’t mean anything’ with Bas. And I expect full updates every time I call.” The sisters hugged, both suddenly serious.

“I love you, Tag.”

“I love you, too, Caitlin.”

Taggie stood on the platform waving until the train disappeared from her sight.

Taggie arrived at Bas’s flat with one minute to spare before 8. The door from the street was unlocked, and his flat door was ajar, so she let herself in. He stood beside the kitchen table, both hands pressed to the surface, reading papers fanned out in front of him. Taggie noticed his dark hair was still damp and the top 3 buttons on his shirt were undone. He must have just gotten out of the shower. She felt her breath come a little faster, shallower, as she followed the line of the V, noticing his thin gold chain. *God, that fucking chain.*

“See something you like?” Moriah whispered. Taggie jumped. She hadn’t heard her come up beside her. Taggie’s face blushed crimson. Moriah gave her a good-natured smirk and took a seat at the table, pulling out a leather bound notebook. Bas looked up, beaming at them both. “Let’s get to work.”

They spent the next two hours discussing the logistics of the kitchen, ordering protocols, suppliers, and outlining menus for the next month. Taggie had also brought a notebook, but she didn't open it. As they chatted, Moriah furiously took notes, sketching out grids to organize her thoughts and their menu and order planning. Taggie looked at Moriah's hyper-structured notes and felt shame for what her own book contained. "Moriah, you are incredible," she whispered, gesturing at the pages. Moriah gave a small, prim smile. 'Thank you, I quite agree.' She gestured at Taggie's unopened notebook. "Speaking of people who are incredible, what do you have there?" Taggie blushed. "I did some planning of my own."

"Come on, let's see it then," Moriah pulled the book towards her, and flipped it open to a random page. Moriah and Bas stared silently at the book, mouths both slightly agape. They both simultaneously looked up at her. Taggie, not knowing if their looks were communicating pleasure or horror, grabbed for the book. "I'm sorry, I know it's embarrassing, we can just—"

"No, Tag. These are—they're *incredible* . Did you *draw* these?" Bas had slid the book across the table, out of Moriah's hand and was turning the pages with a sense of awe, as if it was an illuminated manuscript and not pencil on cheap college-ruled paper.

Somehow even more embarrassed now, Taggie nodded. "Pictures are easier than words."

Bas leafed through the book—page after page of brilliantly colored, detailed sketches of beautifully plated dishes, sketches of the ingredients, beside which were a variety of differently-sized tally marks, other shapes, which he assumed represented proportions, cook times, or other measures. It was not only creative, but systematic in a way equally as rigorous as Moriah's grids. Bas looked up from the book, at Taggie, his chest flooded with warmth and admiration. "You are brilliant," he whispered.

Moriah knew Taggie was an excellent chef, but she was dumbfounded by the pages of Taggie's book. *This shit is ridiculous* . Taggie was an artist, not only in how she crafted her dishes, but apparently also in how she planned and visualized them. Moriah was elated to be able to work with, learn from, someone like this.

Then she looked over at Bas. He had looked up from the notebook to look at Taggie. The directness and heat in his gaze almost embarrassed Moriah. *Christ.* When he whispered in a husky voice that Taggie was brilliant, their eyes catching and holding, Moriah squirmed uncomfortably in her chair, unsure where to look. It felt pornographic. Unable to take the tension, Moriah loudly cleared her throat, pulling the notebook away from Bas. The two of them snapped out of their haze, both studiously looking back at the book. Moriah slid the book back to Taggie, pointing at a drawing. "Tell us about them."

Bas broke the news to Louie that night, and as expected, he stormed out of the Bar, screaming back at the building from the street outside, indignant that he would be fired from such a "pathetic establishment in the middle of nowhere," given his 'substantial skills and

reputation.' Bas immediately called Taggie, who had been waiting by the phone at the Priory. "It's done. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Her first few weeks working in the Bar Sinister kitchen flew by for Taggie. There were many disasters, near-disasters, and fits of yelling by everyone, herself included, as they all adjusted to both a new menu and new leadership. But despite the chaos and stress, Taggie absolutely *loved* it, even if she left exhausted. In fact, she preferred the exhaustion and the distraction. With each day that passed, being in control and orchestrating all the dishes and workflow of a kitchen, helped to soothe the pain of Rupert and Cameron. His abandonment of her after the kiss, the sting of his words at the Hunt Ball—it slowly began to fade, ever so slightly. She felt like her life was full in a way that it hadn't been before, and she was grateful.

The joy this independence gave her helped her to weather Declan's sullenness at being "neglected," as he barely fed himself, other than devouring the meals she brought home after shifts. A month ago, Taggie couldn't have imagined ever wanting to move out of the Priory—she felt responsible for Declan, as if she was her parents' parent. She knew none of them could really get on without her. But she increasingly found that she didn't particularly care. This was reinforced by the first paycheck she received. She gasped when she opened the envelope and saw the amount on the cheque, written in Bas's long, looping hand. She must have stared at it for a full 10 minutes, trying to be sure she was reading the amount correctly and not transposing anything. *This must be a mistake* . She brought it with her to the kitchen the next morning, pulling it out of her apron when he came downstairs to unlock the front door.

She held out the envelope to him, "I think there must be a mistake. This amount can't be right." Bas frowned and pulled out the check, reading the amount. *Christ, she's right. I started her at Louie's salary, but she's worth so much more than that.* His face earnest, his eyes searching hers, he handed the check back to her. "I know it's not what you deserve, especially with how business has been booming lately. I just started you at what Louie had been making, but you're right, you *should* be paid more. I'll fix it next week."

Taggie stared blankly at him, blinking. Then she doubled over with laughter. It was Bas's turn to stare blankly, with a rising sense of panic. *Fuck, is she laughing at me? Is she going to quit??*

Taggie straightened herself, still laughing, and noticed Bas's panicked expression. She put a hand on his chest. "Oh, Bas. I thought you added an extra 0 by mistake. I thought you had accidentally wildly *over* paid me."

Bas clasped both of his hands over hers, heaving a giant sigh of relief. "Christ, I nearly had a heart attack." He handed the check back to her, waving it in front of her face, "But next week's *will* be more."

Bas was thrilled. He had received countless comments about how much better the food was, and the restaurant was busier than it had ever been. For the first time in as long as he could remember, there was often a wait for a table. Through word of mouth, the Bar Sinister was now known as *the* place to eat in Cotchester. In fact, volume was such that they had to hire two more line cooks and waitresses. Thankfully, with Taggie replacing Louie, women

were finally willing to to work there again. He interviewed everyone with Taggie and Moriah. Taggie, as soft as she may appear, was a shrewd judge of character. Between Moriah and Taggie, they had everything in hand. He rather enjoyed feeling like a superfluous, handsome figurehead. *With these two in my corner, there's nothing we can't do* , he thought with satisfaction.

Moriah was also thrilled. She thrived being in charge of the kitchen's logistics. And Taggie was a natural teacher—she patiently explained the how and why of every dish to Moriah as they worked through prep—the textures, balances of spices. *This is what it fucking feels like to LEARN food.* What disappointed Moriah—no, deeply pissed her off—was the level to which it soon became clear that Taggie's parents had done basically *nothing* to support her as a dyslexic child. Moriah's parents, both of whom were employed in service locally, had read countless books, done endless activities with her younger brother as soon as he had been diagnosed. However, based on their conversations, it was very clear to Moriah that Taggie had never even been exposed to any of these concepts, not to mention practiced them. *It would be one thing if her parents were poor—lived in a fucking cottage in bumfuck nowhere, but they're fucking Declan and Maud O'Hara. Guess it's convenient if you're a piece of shit and want a live-in Cinderella until the day you die* , she thought bitterly.

In the Before Times, Bas had avoided the kitchen like the plague. However, Moriah noticed that since they hired Taggie, he was *always* in the kitchen. He always had some excuse about how he wanted to see how everyone was getting on or seeing how the new menu items were shaping up. He was always dipping a spoon in everything, tasting, and moaning. Moriah couldn't blame him—the food was better than it had ever been. But she also noticed the way his eyes followed and drank in Taggie while she worked. *I don't think the new menu is the only thing he wants to sample.*

Toward the end of her first month on the job, she and Moriah packed both of their cars full of hors d'oeuvres, sandwiches, and a massive trifle and drove to the Cotchester polo pitch. Bas was a fixture in the local polo club, and Taggie had agreed to cater the day's polo match. Bas had been explicit that Taggie could continue to cater events if she wanted and could take any time off she needed to do so. However, Taggie preferred to do the prep in the restaurant kitchen and have Moriah as a resource for logistics (they really did make a great team). So now, all catering jobs routed through the Bar, with Taggie and Moriah splitting the profits, minus the ingredients, for which they reimbursed Bas directly.

Moriah, for her part, loved this, as the types of dishes they made for these events were different from what they would typically prepare for the restaurant, with Taggie often using these events to test new dishes before bringing them into the Bar Sinister's kitchen rotation. Moriah had to buy another leather notebook to contain all the gridded out recipes, menus, and pairings that Taggie introduced her to. Under Taggie's tutelage, both Joey and Marty had shown themselves surprisingly prodigious in the kitchen. On days where there was an event like the polo match, the Bar was always painfully slow, so Taggie and Moriah could leave the two of them in charge in the kitchen.

The two of them set up the food under two giant white tents a few meters from the boarded barrier that bounded the polo pitch. Once they finished, they stood side by side, resting their

arms on the top railing, watching the players warm up their horses. Moriah tapped a cigarette out of a pack she pulled from her back pocket. Taggie immediately picked out Bas, wearing white pants, knee-high boots, and a gold polo jersey, which provided a sharp contrast with his dark hair and olive skin. She watched as he stood slightly in his stirrups, leaning forward as he urged his horse into a gallop, his hair tousled by the breeze created by the speed. The back of his shirt flapped up as he sped across the field, revealing a patch of his toned lower back and——

"You're staring."

Taggie jumped, realizing that Moriah was watching her ogle Bas as he rode across the pitch. Taggie's cheeks felt hot. Taggie turned around, leaning back into the railing, saying nothing, drawing a line in the dirt with her shoe

Moriah smirked. "If I wasn't so partial to the fairer sex, I'd climb him like a tree." She gave Taggie a pointed look.

Taggie laughed, noticing that Moriah had caught the eye of a well-dressed, dark-haired woman wearing a wide hat and a deep crimson dress, dressed for polo spectating. Taggie also recognized her as a regular at Bar Sinister. Moriah held the woman's gaze as she put out her cigarette on the railing. Moriah turned to Taggie, "Would you be so kind as to mind the sandwiches while I explore the grounds?"

Taggie grinned. "Not at all."

Moriah winked at her and strolled off toward the woman in the hat.

Taggie watched the match from the shade at the edge of the refreshment tent. She hadn't watched a polo match before, and it surprised her how aggressive the sport was. She knew Bas was very good, but seeing him in action was quite a spectacle. On horseback, Bas was fluid, magnificent. As Taggie watched Bas ride-off one of the opposing team's players, pulling his chiseled chestnut pony parallel with his opponent and leaning into them, pushing them off course and galloping at full speed toward the goal with the ball, she felt weak in the knees. Taggie *had* climbed him like a tree, and watching how he sat his pony and barked out orders on the pitch—it made an encore more appealing than ever.

Since starting at the Bar, she had crossed paths with a steady trickle of beautiful women trying to sneak out the back door of his flat as she was arriving to prep the kitchen in the mornings. The sight amused her. Having been one of those women, she knew they had probably had an *excellent* time. "*Sex is just for fun. It doesn't mean anything."* Taggie frowned as she looked out over the pitch. He had never even hinted at anything that had passed between them the night of the Hunt Ball, which she did appreciate. Their encounter had no strings attached, no expectations. Nothing in their relationship had seemingly changed. He seemed completely uninterested in another amorous encounter, and she wasn't about to suggest it.

A loud cheer and applause from outside the tent signalled the end of the first half of the match. In front of the tent, on the other side of the railing, Bas dismounted, leading his horse close to the rail, handing the reins to a groom. His cheeks were flushed, his dark eyes shining, his hair a mess from being under the required helmet. Taggie could see beads of sweat on his forehead. Noticing her, he waved and smiled. Hoping he hadn't noticed her staring, she

waved back. The tent began to fill with people, including Moriah, who was also flushed, her long blonde hair falling out of her ponytail. She was tucking her shirt back into her jeans.

"How were the grounds?" Taggie asked casually, with a raised eyebrow.

Moriah grinned over at her. "Lush and eager." They both laughed.

Someone opened a gap in the barrier around the pitch, inviting the spectators to come out and participate in the ritual stomping of the divots. Taggie shooed Moriah out to stomp, while she replenished the trays of sandwiches and pitchers of punch.

Bas loved polo. There was nothing like being on horseback, moving with the pony, the adrenaline as he and his mount rode-off another pony and rider pair, claimed the ball, and thundered forward to score. He was by far the best player in Cotchester, which meant he was usually the Number 3 for his team—the field captain. But today, since it was an easy match, he was the Number 2, which meant more ride-offs and sprints with the ball. It was exhilarating. His sincere love for and skill in the game was, he supposed, the only benefit of his parentage.

His whole life, he had faced snide comments, both to his face and behind his back, about his illegitimate paternity. If he had taken after his mother, there could have been some plausible deniability. But as it stood, he was a carbon copy of a famous Argentinian polo player who had been playing his way through Cotchester when he had been conceived. That had given him no shield, verbal or physical, against the shame and insults. His one saving grace was that Lord Baddingham, who he knew wasn't his real father, had always been kind to him. Tony thought (correctly) that Bas was old Lord Baddingham's favorite, and he had always resented Bas for that, which made for a very tense sibling relationship. Once Bas was old enough to ride, his real father, who was always discussed in the Baddingham house as a "family friend," had taken Bas to Argentina each summer. He had learned to ride and first play polo in Cotchester, but he learned to love the sport in Argentina. In Argentina, he could be openly acknowledged as his father's son, without explanations or excuses. In Cotchester, he was the Baddingham shame, a joke, of which his face was proof. As a way to cope, he developed a very easy, go-with-the-flow manner. He thought it was generally a success, as he knew he was generally well-liked and known for being laid-back and an all-around good time. Any sorrows he had, he drowned in polo and women. It had been a sufficient strategy thus far.

At halftime, Bas dismounted his pony and handed him off to the groom. He would swap for a fresh mount for the second half. He headed for the food tent, grabbed two sandwiches from a tray, gave Taggie a friendly wink, then headed back out to the pitch to stomp some divots while he waited for the groom to return. He shoved a whole sandwich in his mouth and started stomping beside Moriah. She scoffed at his overly full mouth. "You've opened Pandora's Box. Our fearless leader is being accosted by every posh cunt here to cater every event in Cotchester for the next 10 years." She pointed with her eyes to Taggie, who was standing at the edge of the tent, surrounded by at least a dozen people.

Bas noticed that Taggie's long red hair was pulled back into a ponytail that ended at her waist, the sun glinting off of it, creating a halo around her head. He noticed the crinkle of the

skin at the corner of her eyes as she laughed, the dimple in her cheek, as she fielded endless questions, compliments from the crowd gathering around her. He noticed the way the thin gold chain of the necklace she wore laid on her collarbone, disappearing under the neckline of her dark blue—

"You're staring."

"What?" He asked, his face blank and confused, as he looked at Moriah.

"You are *staring* . You didn't even fully stomp that one," she said, pointing at a divot by his foot.

"I'm just thinking."

Moriah rolled her eyes. "Thinking about how the sandwich is almost as delicious as its maker?"

Still staring, he shoved the other sandwich in his mouth, tilted his head to the side, passively nodding in agreement. A second later, he fully processed what Moriah had said. He snapped his head around to glare at her as he chewed and swallowed. She studied his face as she stomped the last divot in their vicinity and headed back to the tent. *I think the idiot is blushing.*

The day after the polo match, the three of them were in the restaurant, preparing for opening. The rest of the staff would be coming in any minute. Moriah was dicing a mountain of celery for a mirepoix at one end of the kitchen, and Taggie was frowning over a small saucepan of a copper-colored sauce on the stovetop at the other end. As he had been increasingly wont to do, Bas sauntered into the kitchen, over to the stove, to stand next to Taggie. He leaned his side against the stove, arms crossed against his chest, watching her.

"Moriah? Can you see if we have a bottle of Jameson on the bar? I want to try something."

Taggie stirred the thick sauce and sighed. She grabbed a spoon, scooping up a small amount. "Here, try this. It's for the sticky toffee pudding today. But I think it's too sweet, *cloying* really."

She offered the spoon to Bas. He didn't take the spoon from her hand or just eat off of the spoon. Instead, he slowly encircled her wrist with his fingers and guided it to his mouth, holding her gaze as he did. As he held the spoon in his mouth, taking his sweet time sampling the sauce, his thumb ran along the inside of her wrist. Taggie swallowed, her breath catching in her throat, remembering the last time he had done that. Bas looked up at the ceiling, seemingly weighing his verdict. The sauce *was* very sweet, the deep flavor of brown sugar coating his tongue.

Moriah, appearing with the bottle of whiskey, rolled her eyes and plonked it down between them, returning to her celery. Recovering herself, Taggie added a splash of Jameson to the saucepan and gave it a stir. Bas took the spoon from Taggie's hand, dipped it in the sauce and lifted it to her mouth. Both of them misjudged the trajectory of the spoon, and she ended up with a smear of sauce just above her upper lip. *This version of the sauce was much better—the whiskey cutting some of the sweetness and adding some complexity to the finish.* Taggie

reached for a towel, but Bas lifted his hand to her face, murmuring, “Let me.” She froze, her blood pounding in her ears, as he ran his thumb over her lip, removing the sauce. It shocked both of them when Taggie tipped her head backwards, ever so slightly, and took his thumb into her mouth, wrapping her tongue around it and gently sucking the sauce from it.

A flush crept up Bas’s neck, and his eyes widened in shock, then gleamed with something like desperation. His usual composure and bravado completely gone, he hoarsely whispered, “Fuck me.”

Bas knew he tended to watch Taggie more than he should and sometimes (like just now), he could be cheekier than he should be. But generally, he hadn’t wanted Taggie to feel like anything had changed since the Hunt Ball or like he was using her job to pressure her into sex. So he had kept himself as detached as possible. It wasn’t like he couldn’t satisfy himself elsewhere, and she didn’t seem like she was particularly open to it. *But she can take me for a ride around the block whenever she bloody well pleases.* But as welcome as it was, her putting his finger in her mouth had caught him completely off-guard.

Taggie held his gaze, feeling shocked at herself and just as discomposed. Flashes of that night and morning after the Hunt Ball came back to her—the texture of his hair in her hands, the feeling of his hands on her bare skin, his breath on her neck. *The sounds he had made* . She felt the back of her neck break out in goosebumps, and she clutched at the edge of the counter with her free hand.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the kitchen, Moriah had been able to hear both Bas’s “Fuck me,” *and* the tone with which it was delivered. She didn’t need to turn around to know that they had progressed to something more erotic than tasting sauces for pudding. She began to violently chop the celery, hoping that the clattering of the knife against the cutting board would remind them both that they weren’t alone and that they could compose themselves before she had to turn around. *Christ, time and place.*

Bas slowly withdrew his thumb from Taggie’s mouth. As he did, she pressed her tongue more tightly against it, and an almost imperceptible whimper escaped his mouth. Her eyes were wide and blue, and he remembered how they had looked under him in his flat the morning after the Hunt Ball, her hair fanned out around her head. He felt completely unmoored—the bounds of his reality only consisted of Taggie, Taggie’s mouth, his thumb, the taste of brown sugar in his mouth. He felt like he was going to lose his mind.

Moriah, still facing the other way, looked the clock above her on the wall. “Thirty minutes to open!” She called. The rest of the staff would be arriving any minute and she wanted to avoid a scene.

Bas took three steps backward and ran his hand through his hair. Taggie was still staring him down, breathing heavily, her chest heaving under her apron. He suddenly remembered where he was—what he was supposed to be doing. He shook his head, trying to orient himself. “Yes, on it,” he gasped, turning and stumbling toward the kitchen doors. As he passed through them, he looked down, realizing his trousers were tented at an angle that was positively obscene. *There was no way he could unlock the doors and face the public like this* . He paused for a split second in the kitchen doorway, then it came to him. “You both, um, you handle things for a second? I need to get something in my flat, and I’ll be right back.” He almost ran up the stairs to his flat, locking every possible door after him.

With shaking hands, Taggie began to aggressively stir the already-blended sauce for the pudding, desperately trying to remember what the fuck she had been doing a few moments earlier. From across the kitchen, Moriah suggested Taggie go roll silverware, and she would take care of the sauce, as everything else was ready to go. Taggie breathed an unsteady sigh of relief and left to go wrap silverware behind the bar. She could still taste the rich, sugary vanilla taste of the sauce on her tongue—still *feel* Bas's thumb in her mouth. *Why the fuck had she done that??* Her heart was still pounding and her neck and face felt hot, as she frantically wrapped a large stack of sets of silverware into napkins.

Upstairs, Bas had swiftly wanked himself into a state of presentability. Sated, he walked slowly down the backstairs and began to blindly shuffle papers at the host podium at the entrance of the Bar. After a few minutes, he realized that he had thoroughly scrambled the menus and seating charts that yesterday's closing shift had carefully organized. He grimaced. *The waitstaff were going to kill him* . He might no longer have a raging erection, but after that moment in the kitchen, he found it almost impossible to think about anything other than Taggie's mouth, specifically other parts of his body she might want to put into it. He put his face in his hands, his elbows resting on the podium, and he took a deep breath. The podium was within sight of the bar, where motion caught his eye—Taggie, still flushed and breathing heavily, wrapping silverware with a frantic focus.

Taggie paused, resting her hands on the bar, and leaned forward, trying to take a deep breath to calm herself. She looked up and noticed Bas across the room, giving her a long, steady look. Her breath caught in her throat. She snapped her eyes back down to her task. She looked at the stack of unwrapped silverware next to her and realized, *I'm out of spoons. That doesn't make sense.* With horror, she unwrapped two of the wrapped bundles in her large pile, realizing she hadn't been wrapping *sets* of silverware—she had been wrapping *trios of spoons* . Frustrated, she ripped open the rest of the rolls— *FUCK, all spoons* . She pushed them all into a pile and stormed away to one of the bathrooms. She splashed cold water on her face and slapped her cheeks. "Come on, Taggie. Get it together," she said to herself in the mirror. Her neck and cheeks were covered with a red, blotchy flush that she knew, for once, was the result of an emotion that *wasn't* embarrassment. She leaned back against the bathroom wall and pressed her fists into her eyes. That didn't help. It just allowed her mind to conjure more vivid images of Bas—galloping around on the polo pitch, shirtless and grinning down at her on his bed, and *most* crisp in her mind—how disoriented and desperate he had seemed back in the kitchen. She had found his surprise and lack of "mask" particularly arousing. She couldn't survive an entire shift like this—she was a mess. She thought of the stack of spoons with an embarrassed groan. *What would Bas do?* Then she burst into laughter, remembering how he had run out of the kitchen to his flat and then returned a short time later, surprisingly composed. *She knew exactly what he would do, what he most likely did do. At this point, it just seemed like the practical option.* She made sure the bathroom door was locked, turned off the lights, and started to unbutton her jeans under her apron.

When Taggie stormed off, Bas wandered over to the bar to see what she had found so infuriating. He smirked and shook his head, noticing the chaotic stack of spoons and napkins on one side, knives and forks on the other. He liked the idea of her being just as flustered as he had been. He started sorting and wrapping.

By the time Taggie emerged from the bathroom, feeling much more centered, the rest of the staff had arrived and the restaurant was open. She sheepishly kept to the walls, hoping to

slide back behind the bar and re-wrap the silverware before anyone could notice or need it, then return to the kitchen. As she stepped behind the bar, she was surprised to see the entire mess had not only been organized, but everything was already wrapped. She looked up. Bas had given over the podium to the lunch shift host and was chatting with a couple waiting to be seated. He caught her eye and winked. She smiled and mouthed “Thank you,” and returned to the kitchen.

It was a busy day, and she and Bas avoided each other. When he left in the mid-afternoon for a meeting with the polo club, Taggie breathed a sigh of relief. As smooth as he was, it was a level of awkwardness that may even be beyond Bas’s ability to navigate. Moriah, upon realizing that Taggie’s birthday was the next day, sent her home shortly after. Taggie acquiesced, too embarrassed to admit that she had no plans and that she would be spending her 21st birthday alone at the Priory.

6. Taggie's Birthday

Rupert was in Cotchester at one of the specialty groceries. Cameron was making paella for dinner and hadn't purchased half of the ingredients. This was his second trip back to town that afternoon. This time, he was hunting for saffron. He stared blankly at the jars of spices on the shelf, not registering any of the words on the labels. His experiment with domestic bliss with Cameron was tense at best, and he was relishing having a few moments alone. He began to eavesdrop on the conversation at the counter on his left.

"Can you believe it!? Well, I *can* believe it, but it's shameful all the same. That girl does everything for everyone, and they leave her alone on her bloody birthday."

"The two of them are like children, running off for a second honeymoon to mend fences while their real mother minds the house."

"Mr. Makepiece stopped by the Priory this morning and found her sitting in the dark, in the cold. She had flipped a fuse and accidentally turned off all the power because she couldn't read the fuse box labels. The poor thing was *distraught* ."

Rupert's heart stopped. The image of Taggie, the best person he knew, teary-eyed, huddled alone in the dark in that huge house, left alone on her birthday while her parents had a second, dysfunctional (and likely failed) honeymoon. It sent a pang through him, first of sadness. Then rage. *That fucking family.* Rupert was overcome with the desire to go to the Priory and wrap Taggie in his arms, bury his face in her hair, and hold her. He stalked out of the shop, purchasing nothing, and sped back to Penscombe. He hesitated at the turn into the Priory, remembering Bas's words when he had interrupted him and the blonde on the side of the road. *For Christ's sake, man, either toss over Cameron and make a real play for Taggie or leave her the fuck alone* . He continued on, to Penscombe. Rupert felt that he had been doing an excellent job leaving Taggie alone over the past few weeks. He also felt no small level of satisfaction that he was actually doing the right thing by trying to patch things over with Cameron. Plus, they were about two months from submitting and receiving a decision on their full application, and they truly needed everyone on board.

Rupert walked into the house, entering the kitchen, where Cameron had already started the dish, based on the smells and sizzling sounds emanating from the kitchen. Seeing him, her face lit up expectantly, "Saffron?"

She would never admit it, but she enjoyed the idea of him going to town and getting ingredients for her. It felt domestic, an intimate act of care, and it endeared him to her. Things had been better between them over the past weeks, she felt. Since the karaoke night at the Bar Sinister, Rupert seemed to be making more of an effort. She suspected it had something to do with Taggie O'Hara working with Bas Baddingham now. Perhaps Rupert was willing to respect the other man's territorial claim. She paused and frowned when she saw the cloud over his features.

"No. We're going out. Call The Black Stag and book a table for three."

Cameron gaped at him, gesturing at the hot, half-full pan on the stove, fresh seafood spread all over the counter, ready to be added. She was angry. “Out? Do you not *see* this?”

Rupert scowled, waving his hands at her, as if the gesture would dissipate her objections. “We’re going out. It’s Taggie O’Hara’s birthday, and she’s been left all alone, so we’re taking her out. I’ll be back in an hour, and we’ll go collect her.”

Cameron exhaled sharply, her dark eyes narrowed at Rupert, her blood on fire. *Bad enough he derails hours of work, but for this? For her??* Catching her eye and seeing her frustration, Rupert’s face suddenly went blank. “Unless you prefer she and I go without you?”

Cameron blanched and slowly shook her head. Rupert stalked out of the house, and Cameron took a shaky breath and leaned on the counter, on the verge of tears.

True to his word, Rupert returned exactly an hour later and went upstairs to change without acknowledging Cameron, who waited by the door. When they both got in the car, Cameron noticed a box in the back seat. “What the fuck is that?”

“A birthday present,” Rupert said blandly, adjusting his tie in the rearview mirror.

The box released a small bark and whine. *A fucking puppy. He ran off to get Taggie O’Hara a fucking puppy.* Cameron shrank sulkily into the corner of the passenger seat as they drove to the Priory, which was all lit up when they arrived.

Thank God they got the lights back on for her, Rupert thought.

They parked in front of the Priory, and Rupert violently knocked on the front door. He ran through in his head how he would greet Taggie. He told himself over and over again that he wasn’t making designs on her, but was just being a good friend, supporting her, providing an act of kindness when she was in a low place. As the door swung open, Cameron watched with a sinking feeling as a bright, genuine, and expectant smile spread across Rupert’s face—the first she had seen in weeks. The smile froze on Rupert’s face when he realized he was face to face, not with a distraught Taggie O’Hara, eager to be rescued, but rather an unimpressed *Patrick* O’Hara.

Patrick looked at Rupert, his dark eyes hostile. “And how can I help *you?* Come to borrow a cup of sugar?”

“We’re here to take Taggie out for her birthday. You’re welcome to join, if you like. We have a table at The Black Stag.” Rupert made as if to move past Patrick into the house, but Patrick blocked the doorway, his arms crossed.

Patrick gave Rupert a derisive smirk. “Taggie’s not here. She’s in London with a friend. I expect she won’t be home until tomorrow. You’re welcome to call then.”

Cameron watched Rupert deflate. She was flooded with relief. She looked to Patrick. “Do you happen to have any saffron?” He beamed at her. “I’m sure Taggie has a stash in the kitchen we can raid.” Cameron followed Patrick into the house, leaving Rupert standing on the stoop, feeling like an idiot. When he heard a sharp, small bark from his car, he put his face in his hands. *A fucking puppy? What were you thinking??*

Inside the house, Patrick and Cameron began to rifle through the kitchen cabinets. He turned to her, “With all due respect, why the fuck would the two of *you* be taking Taggie

out?"

Cameron sighed. "Honestly? I think Rupert has a bit of a fixation on your sister. He came speeding home from town and insisted we throw over all our plans for the night to take her out. He also brought her a fucking puppy. It's in the backseat."

Patrick narrowed his eyes at her, and she could see a vein throbbing in his forehead under the dark waves of his hair. He was angry. "A fucking *puppy?* First a Faberge egg and now this." He rolled his eyes. "Christ. He's a persistent old letch."

"A *what?*" Cameron hissed.

Patrick pulled a small jar off a shelf, filled with orange threads. He handed it to Cameron. "Yes, a fucking Faberge egg. He brought it home from Spain for her. She still has no idea what it is, just that it's beautiful. I presume he thought it would impress her and she would drop trou for him on the spot."

Cameron dropped the jar of saffron threads. *A fucking FABERGE EGG?* She remembered the simple pendant he had given her before the awards ceremony in Spain. It had felt so special, meaningful, thoughtful, a token of his admiration for her. But meanwhile, he was dropping God knows how many thousands of pounds on a FABERGE EGG for the wide-eyed Cinderella across the valley. She felt like she was going to be sick.

Patrick caught the jar before it could hit the floor and handed it back to her, moved by her distress. "Cameron, you deserve so much better," he whispered. Tears filling her eyes, she walked out of the kitchen. Rupert was already in the car, waiting for her. They drove back to Penscombe in silence, Cameron clenching the spice jar in her lap. Rupert called to cancel the table as soon as they entered the house, then disappeared into the library, presumably to drink himself into a stupor. Cameron poured herself a whiskey, her appetite gone, and gently lifted Taggie's puppy out of the box. It was a handsome brown and white spotted English Setter, with a small cast on its back leg. She held it up in front of her face to look in its eyes, and it eagerly licked her face. The dam burst inside of Cameron, and she began to sob, cradling the puppy in her lap.

Earlier that morning, Bas was sitting at the kitchen table in his flat, looking at business paperwork for the Bar. This shit gave him a headache—he really just liked drinking good wine and eating good food. He was aimlessly drawing circles on the corner of an envelope while he thought about Taggie O'Hara's mouth. *Yesterday was quite the day.* His phone rang, and eager for a distraction, he jumped up to answer it before it could ring a second time.

"Hello?"

"Bas!?"

"Caitlin O'Hara?"

"Oh thank God you answered. I didn't know who else to call. Taggie's in trouble."

"WHAT?"

“Well, not in trouble, really. But today is her birthday, and Mummy and Daddy are off somewhere trying to fix their marriage, and she’s sitting all alone at home. And I think that is an absolute *crime* . I can’t leave school, and the first person I thought to call was Taggie’s friend, employer, and sometimes lover.” Caitiln delivered the last sentence in a smug, singsong tone, which made Bas laugh.

“I’m on it.”

“Oh, and Bas? If she’s making crumpets, she’s either very happy or very sad, so proceed accordingly.”

Before he left his flat for the Priory, Bas called Moriah and filled her in. “I had planned to go to London later this week to meet with suppliers. I can shift that to today, take Taggie to town. Go around the city, try some good restaurants. Get some inspiration for the Bar while we’re at it.”

Moriah grinned into her phone receiver. “I think that’s an excellent idea. I’d also advise staying the night and coming back tomorrow. I can handle everything here.”

Bas was silent on the other end of the phone, then when he started to protest (weakly), Moriah cut him off. “Don’t play coy. It doesn’t suit you. Book somewhere nice. You can both get it out of your system before you come back to the kitchen. Give her the choice, but we both know she won’t say no.”

Bas pulled up to the Priory and knocked on the door. After waiting for a minute, with no response, he let himself in and made his way to the kitchen. Taggie was facing away from him, as predicted, pouring crumpet batter into metal rings in a pan on the stove, her hair tied back. *Assuming these are sad crumpets.* He noticed with some satisfaction that she was also wearing his green jumper. He cleared his throat and rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. She spun around, her expression cycling through “shocked,” ‘relieved,’ and “embarrassed” within a few seconds. “Embarrassed” was the expression that stuck. “Bas? What are you doing here?”

“Caitlin called me. Happy birthday?”

“I’m sorry. She shouldn’t have bothered you,” she blushed, turning back to the stove, removing the metal rings and preparing to flip the crumpets.

He walked over to stand beside her at the stove, arms crossed over his chest. “It’s not a bother. In fact, I see it as an opportunity.”

“And how is that?” she asked, refusing to look up at him. *Of all days, of course he would show up today. And I would have to be wearing this fucking thing.*

“I’m planning to go to London today for a little R&D—visit our suppliers, check out some restaurants, see if I can scare up any inspiration for the Bar. Why don’t you come with me?”

Still looking down at the pan, Taggie's eyes lit up, and her hand, holding a spatula, froze in place. She hadn't particularly liked *living* in London, but she *had* loved *eating* in London. She also knew suppliers around town and had a number of favorite restaurants, where some friends she made in the London family friends' restaurant kitchen now worked. It would be good to be back in that space again.

"I have to finish frying up these, but once they're off, I can be ready to go anytime."

Bas smiled. "Good. If you don't mind, I'll use your phone and finalize some things." He got halfway to the doorway of the kitchen, when Taggie called out to him. He paused, turning around.

"Bas? I—I'm sorry about yesterday. It was *very* awkward, and I don't know why I did that." Her voice was barely above a whisper. She flushed crimson as she struggled to meet his eyes.

He looked at her evenly, and beyond a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, he didn't acknowledge her apology. "The drive back from London late at night is beastly. I was thinking about staying the night and coming back tomorrow?" His tone was casual, flippant, but the question hung heavily in the air between them. They both knew what he was asking.

Taggie's breath caught in her throat. "Okay," she breathed. Suddenly his jumper felt very heavy and hot around her shoulders.

They shared a long, silent look. "Okay," Bas repeated, disappearing through the doorway.

Taggie stood rooted to the spot, trying to catch her breath as she looked at the kitchen doorway, her mind racing. Suddenly, she smelled smoke. *FUCK.*

She threw all the black crumpets into the trash can. After a moment's hesitation, she also poured the rest of the uncooked batter down the sink. She hung her apron on a hook in the kitchen and headed upstairs to pack her bag.

Since Maud had left, there was no one to steal her clothes. And with her new, big-girl paychecks, she had restocked her closet with lovely things. Taggie had to congratulate herself. She *did* have great taste. (There was a reason Maud raided her closet for Bono's birthday.) Taggie carefully folded two black dresses and a blazer and placed them into the bag, along with a black pair of heels, and the clothes she was wearing, which she swapped out for a dark green, tie-neck blouse and a different pair of high-waisted jeans.

When she came downstairs, Bas was pacing by the front door. He took her bag and added it to his own, already in the back of the car. As Taggie was closing the passenger-side door, her brother Patrick pulled into the driveway on his motorcycle, pulling off his helmet. Taggie flung the door open and ran to greet him. He hugged her tightly, lifting her off the ground and spinning her. "Tag, I'm so, so sorry! I can't believe I forgot, and I came as soon as Caitiln called me."

Patrick paused, looking behind her, to see Bas, standing on the other side of the car. He also noticed the bags in the backseat, picking out Taggie's leather overnight bag. She looked pained, as she hadn't been expecting Patrick to come back. "We were going to go to London."

Patrick winked at her. “I don’t go back until tomorrow night. I’ll see you when you get back tomorrow.”

Taggie hugged him one last time, flashed him a grateful and slightly embarrassed smile, and got back into the car. Patrick chuckled as Bas peeled out of the driveway. While Patrick didn’t approve of Bas—another profligate, local womanizer approaching middle-age—he felt like he was softer around the edges than Rupert—less likely to break his sister. Bas Baddingham would at least show her a good time. And especially on her 21st birthday, Taggie deserved to be spirited around London by a charming, handsome degenerate.

Patrick went into the house and immediately called Caitlin, both to let her know he had arrived at the Priory and that their sister was no longer there. He grimaced and had to hold the phone away from his ear, on account of Caitiln’s shrill shrieks of delight keening through the receiver.

It was a beautiful, mild late summer morning, and they drove through the countryside under a bright blue sky with the windows open. Bas had the radio on, and Belinda Carlisle crooned through the speakers:

Ooh, baby, do you know what that’s worth?

Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth

They say in Heaven, love comes first

We’ll make Heaven a place on Earth

Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth

They spent the rest of the morning and into the afternoon zipping around London, visiting the Bar’s existing suppliers and visiting a range of smaller specialty suppliers that Taggie knew from working and living in the city. Bas had largely left this part of the job to Louie, but he was glad he had come and especially glad he had brought Taggie. She was shrewd *and* kind, which allowed them to negotiate better prices and identify better sources of cheese and meats, in particular.

It was early afternoon when they finished with the last stop and got back into the car. Bas slumped back into the driver’s seat, sighing. He looked at Taggie. “I vote that we head to the hotel, see if we can check in, and feed ourselves. I can’t do any more of this on an empty stomach.”

Taggie laughed. “Food sounds divine.”

They pulled up in front of an elegant, tall, white building. Bas grabbed their bags out of the back of his car and tossed the keys to the valet. As they passed through the front doors, Taggie pulled sharply on Bas’s sleeve. “The fucking DORCHESTER?” she hissed, both impressed and mildly horrified . Her head was on a swivel, taking in the grandeur of the lobby, the mirrored ceilings, the massive bouquets of vibrant flowers, the upholstery on the

lobby couches that probably cost more than Bas's car. Bas pushed his sunglasses up onto his head and gave her a smirk. "What, not up to your standards?"

Taggie snorted and laughed a deep belly chuckle, playfully pushing him away from her. "You are ridiculous."

Bas linked his arm with hers and sighed, letting his sunglasses drop back down over his eyes, "Yes, that's most of my charm."

Behind the front desk were two brisk young women, both of a similar height and with the same black hair (Taggie absently thought they could be twins) dressed in matching crisp, black skirt suit uniforms. Putting his sunglasses in his front jacket pocket, Bas explained to one of them (her name tag read "Lucy") that he had a reservation. While they chatted, Taggie smiled at the other woman (her name tag read "Elizabeth"), who didn't smile back. *Well, fuck me, I guess* , Taggie thought.

As Bas and Lucy chatted, a well-dressed and red-faced older man exited the elevator next to the desk, loudly berating a young porter who was transporting his bags on a luggage cart. Clearly upset and distracted, the porter didn't notice as one of the cart's wheels caught on the elevator door. The cart shuddered to the side, spilling most of the man's bags onto the lobby floor. Without thinking, Taggie jumped in to help pick up the scattered bags, as the man began to scream obscenities at the porter. Taggie silently helped stack the bags on the cart alongside the trembling porter, slowly becoming more and more enraged. The bags now stacked on the cart, the man still screaming, Taggie planted herself between the two of them, putting her hands on the porter's shaking shoulders. She looked down and read his name tag. "Arthur. Are you okay, Arthur?" The gesture seemed to hearten him, and he took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay," Taggie whispered, nodding, stepping back to the desk to stand beside Bas. The four of them watched the man and the porter roll down the lobby, the porter standing a bit straighter.

"Fucking *cunt* ," Taggie muttered under her breath.

The two women behind the desk exchanged a meaningful look. Now, Elizabeth beamed at Taggie. The other, Lucy, looked at Bas. "We don't have your room ready for you yet, Mr. Baddingham, but we will soon. If you care to leave your bags with us, and have a seat and perhaps a drink in the Promenade, we'll have everything ready for you as soon as we can." Bas and Taggie thanked them and followed Elizabeth to a beautifully furnished dining room.

Elizabeth returned to the front desk, to sit beside her sister, Lucy (they were indeed twins). "Well, they were quite precious," Elizabeth said, flatly, as Lucy spun in circles on her stool behind the desk. Lucy stopped spinning as Arthur returned with the empty luggage cart. He ran a hand through his dark hair, looking slightly more composed. His two older sisters gave him a sympathetic look. He leaned back against the front desk and sighed. "After a morning of posh, evil cunts, *she* was refreshing."

Elizabeth looked at her sister, a devilish unfolding on her face. "Yes. Yes, she was. And I think that deserves a good turn, don't you?" She snatched the guest registry for the hotel's high-end suites from her sister's hands. Lucy sighed, and both siblings watched Elizabeth's pen hover above the name written next to the Harlequin Penthouse for that night.

Lucy put her head in her hands. “You know that she’s going to throw a bloody *fit* , don’t you?”

“Mhm,” Elizabeth muttered, nodding absently.

Arthur grinned, “She’s also an evil cunt.”

Elizabeth grinned back at him over the desk. “Yes, yes she is.”

“And what about the price? It’s one thing to give it to them, but *Christ* , Elizabeth, *the price* ,” Lucy muttered from between her hands.

“Easy,” Elizabeth chirped, pointing at the register with her pen. “We pencil these lovebirds in for the Harlequin so anyone else who looks at the register sees that it’s booked. Then, we charge them for a different suite, and just adjust the registry later so it looks like no one was in the penthouse tonight. And we give our nightmare customer a different suite and say someone made a mistake when they booked. Easy.”

Lucy gave her sister a flat, exasperated look.

“What?” Elizabeth asked. “Who’s going to tell? Housekeeping? The kitchen staff? *Us??”*

“And what if she wants to speak to a manager?”

Elizabeth scoffed. “We just connect her by phone to Maurice at the bar in the Promenade. She’s sent back so many of his cocktails and yelled at so many of the waitstaff over the years that he would be *thrilled* to assist.”

It wouldn’t be the first time they did something like this. However, it had usually been sending favored guests “complimentary” bottles of champagne that were very much *not* complimentary (Elizabeth just “disappeared” them from the hotel inventory) or moving guests they decided they liked to slightly better rooms. But they had never done something this bold—flagrantly cooking the books to re-assign the hotel’s most famous suite. Elizabeth deeply resented the Dorchester’s clientele (who were mostly rich, pompous, entitled arseholes). The only people she hated more than the clientele were the hotel’s equally pompous owners and managers. Pulling one over on management *and* one of their most annoying, regular guests would be *very* satisfying. Especially if they could get away with something like this for the fucking Harlequin penthouse.

Elizabeth looked at her two siblings. “So we’re agreed, then?” Arthur grinned, nodding, and Lucy grimaced and looked away.

“Excellent,” Elizabeth chirped, clicking her pen. ‘This bitch can eat shit,’ she said as she drew a single, thick, black line through the name “Maud O’Hara” and wrote in pencil above it, “Mr. and Mrs. Basil Baddingham.”

“Arthur, go tell housekeeping we’re doing a ‘merit upgrade’ and that the Harlequin needs to be ready in an hour,” Elizabeth said.

He saluted her and disappeared into the elevator.

In the Promenade, Bas and Taggie had just finished their second round of cocktails—Hendrick's gin and tonics with a cucumber garnish. As Taggie wasn't a regular drinker, her cheeks felt warm, and the edges of everything felt pleasantly soft. When they were first seated, Bas had moved his chair around the table to sit next to her. The edges of their hands touched on top of the table, their knees resting against each other below. Distracted by each others' proximity, warmed by the liquor, they chatted about the Bar, and completely forgot to order food.

Suddenly, Elizabeth approached to inform them their room was ready and could they follow her please, Arthur the porter trailing with their bags. They watched with some surprise as Elizabeth inserted a key into the elevator and pressed the top button on the panel. She handed the key to Taggie. "You'll need this." The four of them stepped off the elevator, and Elizabeth led them to a door that opened to a staircase. They looked back at her, confused. Their bags were next to them, and automatically, Bas handed Arthur a generous tip. Elizabeth was already back on the elevator, beaming back at them. "You've received an upgrade. It's an off-peak benefit for mid-week stays. You'll be charged for the suite you originally requested," she said, in a firm, clipped tone that did not invite any questions. She handed Bas an invoice that confirmed the price of the suite he had originally booked as Arthur got back into the elevator. Elizabeth flashed them one last brilliant smile, then inserted and turned another key in the panel and they disappeared from view. Bas and Taggie used the key to get into the stairwell, and climbed the stairs to another door.

As they opened this final door, both Taggie and Bas gasped. Taggie instantly recognized the layout, the view, from magazine pictures. "Bas, what the fuck??" she whispered. *If he orchestrated this to seduce me, it really wasn't necessary.* He looked back at her, eyes wide, hands held out at his sides, just as confused as she was. Taggie wandered out to the balcony, which had a fabulous view of Hyde Park. She looked back at Bas, both delighted and dumbfounded. Taggie held out her arms, gesturing to the suite, whispering again, "What the fuck?"

"They must have known it was your birthday," Bas quipped.

Bas stood outside the bathroom door, adjusting his tie in the mirror, while Taggie finished up inside. They had both seen each other naked, *more than naked* , but they had both silently elected to dress in separate rooms. As Bas fixed his tie, he and Taggie spoke through the bathroom door, finalizing their dining itinerary for the evening. *Feels positively domestic* , he thought, amused.

In the bathroom, Taggie was a distracted conversation partner, as she was busy examining the two dresses she had packed and trying to decide which to wear. Emboldened by two gin cocktails on an empty stomach, she chose the more daring option. She assumed that there was an understanding that they would be going to bed together that night. *Doesn't mean that I can't help things along* , she thought with a smirk.

She decided to leave her hair loose, pinning up one of the sides. She had also brought her black blazer in with her and put it on, fully buttoning it and pulling it all the way down before she left the bathroom. If she didn't, she didn't think the two of them would actually make it

out of the suite. As appealing as that sounded, she was excited to eat her way through the city again, and there would be plenty of time for shagging after dinner.

Bas noticed that Taggie emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a long and stylish blazer, with shoulder pads that ended in a sharp point. So wrapped, in fact, that it wasn't clear what Taggie was wearing under it (he assumed she was wearing *something*). What he *could* see, however, was the shape and length of her legs accentuated by black heels. He grinned. Behind polo, fucking, and wine, one of his other favorite hobbies was going on the town with a beautiful woman on his arm. *Three out of four—not bad for one night* , he thought.

When Taggie emerged from the bathroom, she was immediately bombarded by the scent of him

—tobacco, sage. She fought the urge to close her eyes and inhale deeply. He looked wonderful—his tall, muscular figure dressed in black trousers, a deep crimson shirt, and a black tie. Alone in the elevator, their hands met and they linked their pinky fingers together, as they both looked studiously forward and tried not to think too much about the scent and appearance of the other.

From the Dorchester, they could walk to their three restaurant destinations for the evening.

The first was an Italian place on a corner, in a triangle-shaped building with low, warm lighting, known for its house-made pasta and imported meats. At the door, they checked their coats, and Bas immediately understood why Taggie had come out of the bathroom buttoned up like a nun. *They would never have made it out of the hotel* . She was wearing a black cocktail dress that hit her mid-thigh. But with the jacket off, he was able to appreciate that it was made of paper-thin fabric that clung to her slender form. He felt a twinge in his trousers when she slid the jacket off of her shoulders, exposing straps thinner than his finger. It was also *very* clear that she was not wearing a bra. The fact that he had already seen her naked did nothing to ease his distraction—if anything, it just made it worse. He could picture in his head exactly what he would find when he pulled that silky garment up or down. As they were led to their table, Taggie looked back at him over her shoulder, catching his eye, and giving him a slow smile. A wave of warm anticipation and amusement washed over him. *She had done it on purpose, the minx.*

Again, as at the Promenade, Bas pulled his chair around the table to sit next to her—this time, again, with the "excuse" that he could guide her through the menu. That ended up not being the case. Her lack of bra was both more and less obvious at this angle, and he struggled to think about anything other than the outline of her nipples under the thin black fabric. He was both grateful and annoyed whenever a piece of her thick hair fell over her shoulder and obscured her chest from view. In the end, Taggie had to order for both of them, based on recommendations from the waiter.

As they sampled their way through a salty, creamy burrata with a bright pesto, a creamy carbonara on house-made spaghetti, a beautifully cured prosciutto, their knees continued to touch, their hands and forearms in constant contact on the tabletop, as they discussed the ability to make, offer these things at the Bar, the flavors and textures they did and didn't like. Taggie took in his profile—*he was beautiful*. She had also caught him staring at her chest, and

she could feel the tension in his posture. When she noticed other women in the restaurant eyeing him like he was a delicious cut of meat, she felt a bloom of pride and self-satisfaction. *He was magnificent, and he was going back with her tonight.* Bas felt like his head was going to explode, either from overwhelm at how Taggie looked, or how *good* everything tasted.

Their next destination was a small Argentinian restaurant, in a long and narrow building where the host immediately greeted Bas by name *and* in Spanish. Bas returned his greeting, also in Spanish.

"You speak Spanish??" she asked as they were seated, her eyes bright with amusement and surprise.

"Yes, and very poorly, if I do say so myself," he said, laughing, as again, he pulled his chair around the table to sit beside her.

"But how? Why?"

Bas raised an eyebrow. "Taggie, I know you're the purest soul in Cotchester, but even *you* have to know the gossip."

Taggie blushed. She *had* heard the gossip, but had treated it as just another small-town rumor, .

Seeing her discomfort, he gave her a wink and squeezed her knee under the table. He proceeded to both confirm the rumors and explain, very matter-of-factly, that he had spent approximately 20 summers in Argentina, explaining his functional Spanish. He also explained that he no longer went every year, but he had enjoyed it (particularly the food and wine), and whenever he was in London, he loved to come here, as it felt a little like home. Taggie felt a pang for him, particularly for the little boy who had been shipped off, literally across the world, to someone who was essentially a stranger. She knew what it was like to feel like your family wanted to hide you, that you only brought them shame.

As he ordered wine and a selection of dishes in stilted Spanish, Taggie studied his profile. This was a different version of Bas than she was used to. He was usually unflappable, always charming, ready for a good time. Never serious, everything seemed to roll off of him. However, in telling her that little bit, his mask had slipped just enough to give her a glimpse of someone more layered than she had anticipated—someone who also knew what it was to be sad, lonely, not feel like they fit anywhere. She felt a burst of shame for having largely judged him as others did—someone not to be taken seriously, a handsome punchline in local gossip for both his womanizing and paternity. She remembered his kindness after the night she kissed Rupert in the Priory kitchen. *Of course there was more to him* . She squeezed his hand under the table, which still rested on her knee.

The bottle of wine arrived, and Bas talked Taggie through the tasting process, explaining how to swirl the liquid in her glass (demonstrating how with his hand over hers), how and what she should be able to smell, taste in the glass. His eyes were bright, and he was clearly excited as they discussed the notes they both could pick out. Taggie found it very charming. He had ordered them asado and empanadas (one baked, one fried), his two favorite dishes from Argentina. Taggie gasped when she tasted the chimichurri drizzled over the asado, delighting in the bright floral, citrus, herbal potency of it and how it brought the meat to life. He watched with amusement as she systematically dissected the empanadas, examining the

texture of the pastry, the ingredients in the filling, the consistency of the egg wash on the outside—trying to discern how to recreate them. As they ate, Taggie asked questions about the ingredients in everything, and Bas explained how the bold red wine should highlight flavors in the dishes, particularly the asado meats. As they finished their first glasses of wine, the length of their thighs touched, their hands entwined on top of the table. With the second glass, Bas slid his arm around the back of her chair and rested his hand on her bare arm, just below her shoulder. Taggie leaned into him. At one point, he made a joke and Taggie started to laugh and looked up at him, her eyes very blue, very happy, her face very close. Bas felt a jolt of electricity run through him, and both of their breath caught in their throats.

There was a small dance floor at the back of the restaurant, and any other night, Bas would have (and indeed, *had* , with other women he had brought here) lured Taggie to the dimly lit floor to press their bodies together while he demonstrated his tango skill. However, he was finding sitting at this table next to her to be a quite sufficient form of foreplay that engaged *all* his senses. *God, he was going to fuck her absolutely senseless* , he thought with a sly smile as he caught her eye. She smiled back at him, her eyes bright, squeezing his hand. His smile became a grin. *And she knows it* .

Their last stop was a new, chic place in SoHo where the chef was someone Taggie had worked with in the kitchen of their family friend in London. All the patrons were young and fashionable and the lights were so low that it was essentially dark inside. There were no tables available, so they sat at the bar. Taggie ordered for them without looking at a menu, explaining that she and the chef had worked on these two items, and she wanted him to try them. A few moments later, the bartender returned with a rocks glass full of a perfectly clear liquid with a large, perfectly clear square ice cube, as well as a panna cotta that looked to be topped with strawberries. Taggie slid the drink over to Bas. “Try it,” she grinned.

He took a sip, expecting it to taste like water, given its perfectly clear color. Instead, the smooth, almost creamy, liquid tasted like fruit, herbs, citrus, *flowers.*

Taggie laughed as she saw his eyes get wide, then roll back into his head. She took the glass from his hand and took a sip herself. “It’s a milk punch.”

Bas took the glass from her, holding it up between them to look through its perfectly clear liquid at Taggie, clearly confused. “*Milk* punch?”

Taggie laughed. “*Clarified* milk punch. Gin, rosemary syrup, hibiscus tea, lemon juice, a little rosewater. Then it’s added to milk, which curdles and pulls out all the impurities, leaving a perfectly clear liquid but with all the flavors.”

Bas declared that he had always known she was a witch and this was just more evidence, then promptly ordered another. Taggie carved off a silky, white edge of the panna cotta, making sure to include a tender, syrupy strawberry. She lifted it to his mouth, and he audibly moaned—the creamy texture with the same subtle spectrum of flavors as the punch, but all dancing under the bold, somehow tangy and sharp, somehow caramel-like and sweet, strawberry. “*Fuck* me,” he mumbled, his mouth full. Taggie laughed again and served herself, having a similar reaction. “Made from the curled milk from the punch, with all the flavors in it, topped with roasted strawberries drizzled in balsamic vinegar.” Bas promptly ordered another.

They stayed for two rounds of drinks there, their composure unwinding along with their sobriety. They slid their barstools as close to each other as possible. Bas had rolled up his shirtsleeves, and Taggie could see the tendons move in his forearms as he lifted his rocks glass to his mouth. As he leaned forward, she also noticed how his shirt tightened over his shoulders and upper back. She wanted to pull the tails of his shirt out of his pants, slide her hands under the fabric, over him. *Christ* . She settled for resting one of her hands on his thigh, probably higher than was decent. Their drinks empty, Bas had turned sideways in his stool, with Taggie's stool between his legs. As she chatted with one of the bartenders about their cocktail list, Bas pretended to listen while the index finger of one of his hands slowly traced the line from her neck to the top of her shoulder. His other hand was resting on her thigh, his thumb slowly running back and forth over the hem of her dress. Taggie was doing an admirable job chatting with the bartender, but Bas could tell by the way she swallowed and squeezed his leg that he was also doing an admirable job distracting her. He was considering the feasibility of sliding his hand all the way up her dress when another bartender approached, asking them to settle their tab, as his shift was ending.

As they paid the tab, Taggie, flushed, turned to Bas. "There's one last place I would like to go, for old times' sake. Do you have one more stop in you before we head back?"

He swallowed heavily and mustered a smile. *I barely had this stop in me.* "Of course."

They walked down the block and soon arrived in front of what looked like an abandoned building. Bas, his randyness momentarily forgotten, looked around confused, thinking Taggie must be lost.

Taggie laughed and grabbed his hand, pulling him through a door and down a dark stairwell. As they descended, Bas could hear (or rather *feel*) loud music coming from ahead of them. Taggie smiled at two large men standing by another door, as she slipped some banknotes into one of their hands. As they opened the metal basement door, a wave of sound, color, and the smell of sweat washed over them. On their right was a long, rectangular bar, and in front of them was a massive dance floor, packed with people.

Taggie noticed Bas's disoriented expression and laughed, pleased at how surprised he was. She had to yell over the music, "I used to come here with Patrick's university set when we were in London. It's where the young, hip crowd comes." She laughed again, seeing he was still shocked she would bring him to a basement rave. "I'M DYSLEXIC, NOT A HERMIT," she yelled over the music, pulling him toward the bar. He laughed and followed her.

Bas could feel the music pounding in his chest, like a second heart.

Sweet dreams are made of this

Who am I to disagree?

I travel the world and the seven seas

Everybody's looking for something

They hooked their coats under the bar and sipped very bad vodka sodas. While the drinks were objectively shit, the music, the lights, all of it—was a sensory experience just as

deliciously overwhelming as their restaurant tour had been.

Taggie *had* come here with her older brother's friends. It was also the first place she had kissed Ralphie, standing in the dark along the wall. It had felt like her world stopped, shifted when he had kissed her, like she would love him forever. She smiled, fondly, thinking that it seemed like—it was—a lifetime ago. She had thought she would never recover from Ralphie. She had thought she would never recover from Rupert. Yet here she stood. She had survived them both. She looked up at Bas, who was watching her closely over his drink. Taggie grinned and took his hand, pulling him out onto the floor. Bas, no stranger to a dark basement club, gleefully chased after her. They found a place on the floor, under the flashing lights, surrounded by the heat and energy of a hundred other bodies. Taggie turned to Bas and pulled him in close, pressing her forehead to his, and put her hands up over her head as she swayed with the music. He ran his hands down her sides, his thumbs barely missing her nipples under the thin black fabric. His hands on her waist, and the lights flashing around them, the music so loud, it drowned out her thoughts, Taggie felt euphoric.

Suddenly all sound died in the dark basement club, and the lights went black. Then the opening bars of a different song began to blast through the speakers, as the lights began to flash around them. They held each other's eyes, neither moving, as the bodies thrashed around them.

Life is a mystery

Everyone must stand alone

I hear you call my name

And it feels like home

They came together then, eager, desperate, oblivious to the ecstatic chaos that surrounded them.

Neither of them had any idea how much time had passed when they finally came up for air—it could have been 10 seconds, it could have been an hour. Taggie inhaled deeply, relishing the smell of his cologne and pressing her body closer to his, her face in his neck. Bas shifted one hand from her hair down the front of her dress. He felt her nipple harden under his touch, and she moaned against his neck, and she pulled his mouth down to hers. Taggie pressed herself against him, slipping one hand in the back of his pants, pulling his shirttail up, finally getting her hands on the skin of his lower back. Taggie shifted herself slightly to the side, so one of his thighs was between her legs. He responded by sliding a hand to her ass and pressing her as tightly against him as possible, eliciting a very desperate, hoarse "FUCK" from both of them.

Then, he was pulling her off the dance floor, leading her to a dark corner of the club, which she recognized as being home to the bathrooms.

He pulled her into the first empty, dimly lit room, locked the door, and pushed her back up against the sink. Then he sank to his knees, looking up at her, his dark eyes hot. Taggie, understanding what he wanted to do, paused for a fraction of a second, then began to frantically yank her dress up around her hips. Just as desperately, he jerked her underwear

down her legs. She stepped out of it, and he blindly threw it over his shoulder. He lifted one of her legs up over his shoulder and pushed her back against the sink. When he put his tongue on her, *in* her, she gasped and leaned back against the sink, grasping it with one hand for balance, and tangling the other in his hair. She moved her hips against his mouth, as she felt the tension build inside of her, enjoying herself too much to be ashamed that she was riding someone's face in a disgusting club bathroom. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK". Her legs trembled as she felt the wave crest and she melted into his mouth with a weak laugh. She slumped backward against the sink, shakily sliding her leg from his shoulder, tipping her head back. 'Fuck,' she whispered, looking up at the yellowed tiles of the ceiling. Then she tilted her head forward, meeting Bas's eyes, still on his knees in front of her, looking like a man possessed. "Fuck." she said, as she grabbed his tie and jerked him up from the floor.

Taggie pushed herself up on the edge of the bathroom sink, and pulled him in to kiss her. His tie loose, she yanked it around so it laid back over his shoulder and began frantically working on the top buttons of his shirt, while he ripped at his belt. Taggie succeeded in releasing the top three buttons, but the fourth stuck. Frustrated, she pulled at his shirt, sending the fourth button flying across the bathroom. Bas's trousers and boxers hit the floor, his belt buckle "clinking" as it hit the concrete, and he reached for her dress, peeling it down so it hung like a loose belt around her waist. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and stretched out one hand behind her to steady herself on the sink edge, pressing her palm against the mirror above the sink.

"SHIT." Bas suddenly bent over, frantically searching his trouser pockets for a condom. Taggie almost fell off of the sink. Despite her horny desperation, she couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculous picture the two of them made. Standing again and sufficiently wrapped, Bas met her eyes, and they both laughed as he pulled her to him, her legs back around his waist. They both gasped as he entered her. She slid one hand into his shirt, and pulled one of his hands up to her breast with the other before she pressed it back against the mirror. Bas put one hand under her ass to help move her hips in time with his. The music thumped away outside while the two of them moved against each other, rutting like two desperate animals on the bathroom sink (the mirror behind which Taggie was hopelessly smudging with her attempts to steady herself). Finally, satisfied, they collapsed into each other, their foreheads pressed together, laughing softly, wrapping their arms around each other, their faces and bodies both covered in a light sheen of sweat. They both looked down at themselves and then back up at each other, grinning. *It's fun to be bad* , Taggie thought.

With shaky hands and legs, they adjusted themselves and prepared to return to the world outside. As they stepped out of the bathroom, it was clear a line had developed during their interlude. A 20-something man, who looked like he was about to piss his pants, charged past them, slamming and locking the door behind him. In the slightly brighter light of the hallway, Taggie noticed that Bas's shirt was misbuttoned (largely due to it now missing a button), and the straps of her dress were twisted around. Taggie gave Bas a small smile and unbuttoned, then re-buttoned his top buttons, while he straightened the straps of her dress. Despite what they had just done, she blushed as she smoothed the front of his shirt with her hands. Somehow that gesture felt more intimate.

"May I interest you in another terrible drink?" he asked with a playful, sideways smile. She laughed and nodded, following him back to the bar.

At the bar, two men sat, side by side. Both were bartenders at the last restaurant Taggie and Bas had visited that night. The bartender who had closed out their tab elbowed the other, gesturing towards Bas and Taggie with his head as they walked back toward the bar. He held out his hand. The other man rolled his eyes and slapped a five pound note in his friend's outstretched hand.

"Five? We agreed on ten."

"Yeah, but they didn't fuck in *our* bathroom."

Taggie and Bas, sated, stood silently at the corner of the bar, their elbows just touching, as they grinned and drank positively vile vodka sodas. When a seat opened up at the bar, Bas gestured for Taggie to take it. She sat, then an instant later, Bas saw her face go white. She looked at him and suddenly began to laugh, doubled-over on the barstool, until tears ran from her eyes. Not understanding, he leaned down to her ear, "WHAT IS IT?" he yelled over the din of the music.

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, and trying to catch her breath, Taggie pointed towards the long bathroom line. She leaned forward and yelled into Bas's ear, "MY UNDERWEAR IS STILL IN THE BATHROOM."

Their eyes met, and they both doubled over with laughter. "Time to retire to the penthouse before you expose yourself?"

Taggie beamed up at him, her eyes still teary, and he felt a warmth spread through his chest. "Yes. I think so."

Soon after Bas and Taggie returned to the penthouse, there was a knock at the door by the stairway entrance. It was Arthur. He was holding a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, along with two glasses. "Complimentary champagne. Comes with the suite." Bas tipped him, took the bucket and glasses. He wiggled them back and forth in front of Taggie. "Champagne?"

"Yes, but only if we can drink it in the bath," she said with a wink, taking the glasses from him.

"Do you feel like Elizabeth Taylor?"

"Do you feel like Richard Burton?"

They were reclined at opposite ends of the massive red Italian marble tub, flutes of champagne in their hands, bubbles up to their chins, grinning at each others' reflections in the massive mirror behind the tub. Their legs were stretched out, their toes touching each others' knees. Taggie lifted her head to look at Bas straight on, her hair wet and plastered to her head. "Bas, thank you. This has been the best day."

He gave her a small smile. He reclined back, looking up at the ceiling, “It *has* been the best day,” as he ran his foot along the inside of her calf. Taggie laughed and slid down in the tub so her own foot could slide up his leg, above the knee. He lifted his head to look at her archly. “Don’t start something you don’t plan to finish.” Her mouth twisted into a self-satisfied smirk, as she scooted toward him in the tub in order to slide her foot further up his inner thigh.

He set down his champagne flute, and slowly slid his hands up her calf and began to pull her toward him. She grinned and leaned forward, reaching for him.

By the time they left the red marble bathtub, the water was cold and they had splashed out most of the suds onto the floor. They wrapped themselves in plush white robes and set up camp in the central bedroom, which had floor to ceiling windows, providing a lovely view of the skyline. Taggie leaned back against the headboard, and motioned for Bas to lie back between her legs. With his back pressed into her chest, her face in his wet hair, and his arms pressing her legs against his sides, she slid her hands to his neck, rubbing the muscles, then began to massage the sides of his scalp with her finger tips. He moaned happily and leaned back into her. Taggie closed her eyes and wished the night would never end.

But it did end, as all good nights must.

When they fell asleep, looking over the city lights of London, they agreed that they would plan to eat breakfast in the restaurant downstairs before they had to check out. While they, in theory, had plenty of time to do that, the next morning, Taggie woke up first. She propped herself up on her elbow and slid her hand inside Bas’s robe. His dark eyes snapped open, and he reached for her. Two hours later, Taggie was folded in half, her legs up over Bas’s shoulders, her hands clenched into fists in the white silk sheets, when a polite knock rapped at the door, and an embarrassed voice called out, telling them it was time to check out.

Taggie started to laugh, then moaned, as Bas hit her at a particularly good angle.

“Shit. Fuck, Bas, we need to— *fuck* .”

Bas paused, then called out brightly, “Of course! We’ll be down in ten minutes!”

Taggie looked up at him, laughing. “I can’t believe you.”

He gave Taggie a wink and went back to work.

Arthur came down the elevator, pacing back and forth in front of his sisters at the front desk, colored like a beet from scalp to neckline.

“If they’re not down, how are we going to clean it in time before the managers do the morning walk-through? If they find out, we’re going to get fired!” He put his head in his hands. Elizabeth leaned back in her chair. “Oh, come on, Arthur. Relax, will you?”

When the bell on the elevator dinged, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Taggie and Bas came off the elevator, both looking flushed, with nearly a minute to spare.

"Did you enjoy your stay?" Elizabeth asked, flatly.

Bas and Taggie looked at each other, both trying to suppress smiles as they noticed how they both looked—Bas's *entire* shirt misbuttoned, his fly half-open, his hair sticking up. Taggie's trainers were untied and her hair was a mess of tangles. Bas snorted and nearly dissolved into hysterics, noticing that Taggie's (his) dark green jumper was on both inside-out *and* backwards.

They both turned back to Elizabeth, the edges of both of their mouths twitching. "Yes," they answered simultaneously.

"Excellent!" She beamed, clapping her hands together. "We hope to see you back soon!"

They walked down the lobby, back out to the valet stand, Taggie's arm around Bas's waist and his hand in her back jeans pocket.

As soon as they pulled away from the valet stand, Bas donned his sunglasses and the two of them fixed their clothing. She reached for his hand across the console, and he took it, entwining his fingers with hers.

They arrived at the Priory by noon.

"Come in," Taggie said, squeezing his hand.

Bas pushed his sunglasses up on his head and followed her into the house.

Across the valley, Rupert was pacing back and forth in the Penscombe parlor as the sun began to set. Cameron thought he would wear a hole in the carpet.

Having recovered somewhat from the emotional rollercoaster of the previous day, she found herself wishing Rupert would suggest going back to the Priory. She dreaded the idea of seeing him ogling Taggie, but she sincerely wanted to see Patrick again. She liked him. He was one of the few men who seemed interested in her for something other than gaining an edge in the television business. Finally, after watching Rupert pace what had to be his thousandth lap in front of the window, she asked him if he wanted to go to the Priory and check in on the O'Hara siblings, just to be neighborly. The eagerness on his face as he agreed made her heart sink.

Rupert frowned as he recognized Bas's car in front of the Priory. Still, he and Cameron knocked, and receiving no answer, walked in, heading for the television room.

From the doorway, Rupert spotted a very smug looking Patrick sitting in an armchair. Patrick didn't greet him, and instead looked past him, as he stood up. "Hi Cameron."

On the sofa on the other side of the room, Rupert could see a pair of long legs stretched out, the socked feet crossed, resting on the armrest. A newspaper was open, blocking the rest of the body. Then, the newspaper dropped flat, along with Rupert's stomach. The legs belonged to Bas Baddingham, who was reclining on the Priory sofa. His head was in Taggie

O'Hara's lap, her fingers in his hair. Bas beamed up at Rupert and Cameron, but made no move to sit up.

"Afternoon!"

Taggie also didn't move, only smiled and gave a surprised, weak, "Hi."

Rupert noticed a cloud pass over Taggie's face. He cringed as he remembered the last time they had spoken—it was at the Hunt Ball. Taggie looked at him steadily. He struggled to identify any of the old thrill or flush in her cheeks as she held his eyes. *I've lost her. I've fucking lost her* . Rupert suddenly understood Patrick's smug look yesterday and today—Bas must have been the "friend" who took her to London. And based on their current posture, Rupert could only imagine how they had spent the previous day. He knew Taggie was working for Bas, but the entire county also knew that Bas had continued his normal womanizing, which reassured Rupert that Taggie had just been a one-time fling. This, though, was something different.

Rupert didn't remember what he said or how he extracted himself from the situation, but a few minutes later, he found himself and Cameron back at Penscombe. *I need a fucking drink* .

That night was the first night in weeks that Cameron didn't catch Rupert periodically looking out of their bedroom window, looking for Taggie's bedroom light across the valley. While he may not have looked, Cameron did. It never turned on. That night, Rupert reached for her with a quiet desperation that felt like grief. Afterward, Rupert let Cameron hold him, his head on her chest. She stroked his hair and felt her heart swell. *I can see him through this* , she thought. Again, Cameron was grateful for Bas Baddingham. If he stayed the course, all may be right in her world.

Bas had felt Taggie's hands freeze in his hair and her breath catch and body tense when Rupert walked into the doorway.

The poor kid still hasn't gotten the old dog out of her system , he thought with a pang of pity.

Taggie, however, had no idea how she really felt. Rupert and Cameron had appeared in the doorway, with Taggie barely being able to register they were there. She hadn't seen Rupert in weeks, and the sight of him did rattle her. Not only because of the sour way he had treated her the last time they had spoken, but also because, even now, she could still feel the stubborn tug of that same old thread that she had worked so hard to cut. The sharpness, brilliance of it had faded, but it was still there. *It might always be there* , she thought with something like despair.

Eventually, Patrick said he had to go back to university and Taggie extracted herself from Bas to walk him out the door to his motorcycle. Patrick put on his helmet, hugged his sister, and stepped on the bike. "Happy birthday, Tag," he said with a smile, and sped off.

Taggie stood in the Priory driveway until she could no longer see her brother's form. Turning, she noticed Bas leaning in the front doorway, watching her. She leaned back against the side of the doorway opposite him, small smiles on both of their faces. Taggie looked down at their feet, then back up at Bas. "Time for you to go, too?" she asked quietly, trying to mask her disappointment.

“Why don’t you come back to mine? We can chat with Moriah tonight and draft some menu changes based on yesterday,” he said lightly. Then he looked away from her, out at his car, then back at her, his voice a low whisper, “You could just walk downstairs in the morning.”

Taggie’s smile widened. “Okay,” she breathed.

“Okay,” Bas repeated, his smile matching hers.

7. Is it Casual Now?

When Taggie and Bas arrived back in Cotchester that night, Taggie noticed that Bas parked by the street-side door that *didn't* require them to pass through the restaurant. Taggie snickered to herself in the dark. *So much for coming back here to discuss menus.* When they got up to the flat, Bas didn't move to turn on any lights. He just looked over at her in the dim light, a mischievous smile on his face that she met with her own.

"Oh, come on, then," she laughed, rolling her eyes, and grabbing his arm to pull him back toward his bedroom.

The next morning, Rupert sat in a dejected silence in the back of his car with Gerald as they drove to London. Gerald had grown used to Rupert's sulking, assuming that Rupert's dour moods were likely due to his recent romantic choices. Gerald had seen the way he and Taggie had looked at each other for months. He had also seen Rupert hold her after they ran her off the road. He had *also* noticed how Rupert's moods had gotten increasingly worse after Cameron moved into Penscombe. All of these data points gave Gerald the confidence to clear his throat and tell Rupert that he had heard from a university friend that there was a new scoop at *The Scorpion* , intended to go out in the next morning's issue, that Rupert may be interested in. Rupert rolled his eyes. "And why the fuck should I care?"

Gerald cleared his throat and adjusted his tie, looking out the window, "I understand it consists of some rather compromising photos of Bas Baddingham and Taggie O'Hara."

That got Rupert's attention. His eyes, dark and determined, snapped up to meet Gerald's, his tone urgent, "Gerald. I don't care what you have to do to my schedule or what state business you have to neglect, but for the love of God, get me the details by noon."

At least he's in a better mood when he's in savior mode, Gerald thought with amusement.

Ever a model of efficacy, Gerald scheduled Rupert a lunch that same day with the photographer whose photos were the basis of the feature. When the photographer slid a stack of photos across the table, Rupert's heart clenched and his mouth went dry. In all of them Taggie was a *vision* —not only beautiful, with her hair loose and in that maddening little dress, but joyful. She positively *glowed* . Rupert grimaced when he noticed that in every single one of them, the object of her unbridled adoration was Bas fucking Baddingham. He thought back to the image of them at the Priory, his head in her lap, her hands in his hair. *So there is something else going on.* Most of the photos made the two of them look like fucking lovesick honeymooners: feeding each other, hands all over each other, faces pressed together, whispering conspiratorially.

It was the last three photos that were the heart of the piece, and Rupert instantly understood why. All of them were taken in a basement club in SoHo—the first was Taggie

and Bas on the dance floor, looking like a promotional poster for Dirty Dancing—Taggie in her barely-there dress, Bas's tongue down her throat, his hands all over her. Rupert raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side, *Not great, but not terrible* . The next one, however, was much worse. Rupert had done his fair share of loo fucking, and he was very familiar with the aesthetic—misbuttoned shirts, rumbled hair, dirty knees. And in this photo, Taggie and Bas had clearly just had a wild romp in what looked to be the *very* dingy club loo, judging by the look of Bas's trouser knees. In spite of himself, he found himself chuckling—Bas really was incorrigible. And jealous as he was, it *did* please him that someone like Taggie was able to get her bell rung by someone like a Bas in a nightclub loo. Rupert would obviously rather it was him, but he felt happy for her. *Finally an age-appropriate activity.* However, Rupert felt the blood drain out of his face as he looked at the last photo. In his opinion, this was the worst one of all—Taggie rebuttoning Bas's shirt, beaming up at him as if he was God. For the first time since the Hunt Ball, Rupert felt his envy of his friend be overcome by how moved he was by the idea of Taggie feeling happy, free. He ran his finger over Taggie's face in the photo, and he felt a lump rising in his throat. For a moment, he couldn't speak. He desperately wanted to be the person she looked at like that. Regardless, it did sincerely make him happy to see her happy. *If this is what growth feels like, I fucking hate it.* Collecting himself, he stared daggers at the photographer. "I'll give you anything you want, any dirt of mine to print in a future issue, but you can't print any of these photos," Rupert hissed, pulling the three club photos out of the stack.

The photographer sputtered, protesting that this was a *very* good scoop, career-making stuff, really, especially since he knew it was Declan O'Hara's daughter in the photos. He couldn't imagine that Rupert still had any new skeletons in his closet that could compete with this. Without these photos, the piece was fluff—barely *Scorpion* material.

Rupert's eyes were dark, his tone deadly. "I'll make it worth your while. I will also need the negatives and any other prints of these, or I will personally ruin your life."

That same morning, Moriah arrived at the Bar Sinister kitchen an hour earlier than normal. Taggie was due back that day, and Moriah wanted to make sure everything was ready for her. When Moriah walked through the double doors into the kitchen, she stopped dead in her tracks. In her peripheral vision, she could see Taggie was sitting on the stainless steel counter at the other end of the kitchen, Bas standing between her legs. They were locked in a passionate kiss, with one of his hands under her jumper and one of her hands down his pants. Moriah squeezed her eyes shut, silently mouthing *fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,* and slowly backed out of the kitchen. She wrapped silverware out at the bar for the next hour, until the two of them came out of the kitchen, flushed and acting like everything was normal. *Fuck, that was not what I meant by "getting it out of your system."*

After closing that night, Taggie and Bas sat silently, side by side on his sofa, mindlessly staring at the television. Both of them were breathing heavily and their clothes and hair were a rumpled mess. They had gotten as far as the landing outside Bas's flat before they had accosted each other again. This time, Bas had turned her around and pressed her against his

kitchen counter. Taggie sported a very self-satisfied smirk. Until that night, she had never been bent over anything before, and she had found she quite enjoyed it.

Taggie turned to Bas. “I should probably go back tonight.” she said breathlessly. “People will think I moved in,” she teased.

Bas sat very still, looking ahead at the television. *Don’t say it, Bas. Don’t do it. Even you know this is a stupid idea.* He slowly turned his head to look at her, resting his cheek on the back of the sofa. “What if you did?” he said.

Taggie looked back at him, silent, still trying to catch her breath, her eyebrows drawn together in confusion. *I think he’s being serious.* She had felt this way once before—when Caitiln had bullied her into riding a rollercoaster. As they plummeted down the steep drop, their hands in the air, screaming, Taggie had felt completely out of control, sure she was going to die, but also like her blood was white lightning. *Absolutely not, Agatha. This is a terrible idea.*

“Okay,” she breathed, suddenly feeling very bold. She imagined herself back on the rollercoaster, her arms up—only this time the track was broken and she was flying off into the abyss.

“Okay,” Bas repeated, a pleased half-smile spreading across his face. He had surprised himself by asking, and she had shocked him even more by agreeing.

Later that night, Bas drove her to the Priory, where she collected a few boxes of her kitchen essentials and threw her favorite clothes into the backseat of his car. She had no idea what it meant that he had asked her or what he expected from her—she knew it wasn’t love or even an offer of an official relationship. It was the most rebellious, stupid, reckless thing she had ever done. And it felt *amazing* .

The next morning, Maud O’Hara picked up the daily copy of *The Scorpion* from outside the door of their hotel suite, leafing through the pages as she came back to bed on the last day of her and Declan’s second honeymoon. Declan watched her face change from bright red, to white, to green within the space of about 20 seconds.

“Maud? What is it? What’s wrong?”

Without a word, she threw the paper down on the bed, storming to the bathroom. She found it insulting enough that she had been denied the suite she had requested, the suite she *needed* to feel seen, special. But it was *insufferable* for it to be *Taggie* that had taken it from her, especially with Bas Baddingham, whom Maud had once fancied as a lover for herself. She remembered the smug demeanor and faux-sweet consolation of the frigid bitch at the hotel’s front desk— “I’m so sorry for the mix-up. If it’s any consolation, the couple in the Harlequin is the most *delightful* pair of newlyweds.” *Taggie and Bas Baddingham, newlyweds. That would be the fucking day.*

First she takes Rupert and now Bas Baddingham?? Where was the fucking justice? Taggie, always so high and mighty, judging Maud for every little thing, and now the little hypocrite is out whoring around with the very men that she said were no good for her own mother. Maud heaved a heavy sigh of self-pity.

Declan picked up the paper and rapidly flipped through the pages, looking for what could have caused his wife such offense. Finding it, his face turned crimson. He threw the paper to the floor and immediately picked up the phone to call the Priory. It must have rang 40 times, and there was no answer.

“MAUD! MAUD!” He bellowed, following after his wife.

Behind the front desk of the Dorchester, Elizabeth closed and folded that day’s edition of *The Scorpion* , lying it delicately on the desk. She could see the hotel manager stalking down the hallway, murder in his eyes, with two security guards in tow.

She looked at her sister, resting her chin on her fist and sighed, “I guess my luck was destined to run out at some point.”

Declan left Maud in London and sped back to the Priory. He flung open the front door, yelling Taggie’s name—no response. He stalked to the kitchen—empty. He stormed up the stairs and threw open the door to her room—also empty. Half an hour later, he was satisfied that she was not only not in the house, but nowhere on the property. He returned upstairs and did a more careful walk-through. Taggie’s toothbrush and hairbrush were both gone. Her closet was half-empty. Declan, realizing that not only was Taggie gone from the Priory, but most of her things were gone as well, clenched his jaw and flew to Cotchester, pulling in sideways in front of the Bar Sinister. He began frantically banging his fists on the locked front door. When that didn’t accomplish anything, he went to the street-side door that led to Bas’s flat. When that, too, was locked, he returned to the front door, and began screaming as he continued to hammer away on the door.

Soon, Bas appeared on his balcony, above the entrance to the Bar. He was half dressed, rubbing his eyes, yawning. “Declan?”

Declan’s face was red with rage, his eyes wild. “Where the *fuck* is my daughter!?” he bellowed, waving that day’s copy of *The Scorpion* around his head. Bas just gave him a confused look, which just made Declan angrier.

Then, a fully-dressed Taggie appeared beside Bas on the balcony. Her appearance seemed to both relieve and further infuriate Declan. “What the *fuck* did you *do* , Tag?? Did you fucking *marry* this degenerate?” Taggie and Bas looked at each other and started laughing.

“What? You think this is some kind of *joke?*” Declan roared. He ripped out the page with the article, throwing the rest of the paper behind him, his index finger jabbing at the text, as if that would somehow allow Taggie and Bas to read it from the second floor balcony. “*Fucking* ‘Mrs. Baddingham.’ ’ *Newlyweds in the penthouse?*’ Why the *fuck* are all of your things *gone* from the Priory? Have you *moved in with him?* I’m gone for *one fucking week* and this is what happens??”

Taggie disappeared from the balcony. A few moments later, the Bar’s front door opened, and she let Declan inside. However, the damage was already done. Before Taggie could let Declan inside, the busybodies on the street were already on their telephones, spreading their

versions of events. Bas, still leaning on the railing of his balcony, shirt unbuttoned, gave a friendly wave and a smug grin to the people peeping out their curtains or watching from the street and went back inside.

Taggie's saving grace was that Declan didn't know the layout of the Bar, so he didn't know there was a back staircase to get to Bas's flat. Otherwise, her father would have charged up those stairs and paid her no mind. As it was, he was hard enough to reason with. He just paced back and forth, screaming, slamming the article against the tables. She was finally able to convince him that she *hadn't* eloped with Bas that weekend. They had only spent the night in the city. Declan, however, was still livid.

"This isn't a joke, Tag," he hissed, again stabbing the newspaper with his finger.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I agree. It's not a joke. It's my life."

"*Your life* ," Declan mocked, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "And what a mess of it you've already made, eh? Light petting all over town with your boss, a notorious womanizer and degenerate, then what? That little romp isn't enough, so you let him move you in? Like what? Like some kind of kept woman? You going to warm his bed to pay your rent, is that it? Don't you have any dignity? Any *sense?"*

Taggie felt like she had been punched in the stomach. As crass and cruel as Declan was being, he wasn't necessarily wrong—it was quite brazen and stupid of her. But she didn't care. She wasn't in love with Bas, he wasn't in love with her—neither of them expected anything from the other. It was a stupid impulse, one they would probably regret and decide against in a week. But she didn't want to hear that from her father. Right now, she was stubbornly determined to be impulsive and stupid. It was something she hadn't gotten to do often enough.

When Taggie didn't respond, Declan went to put his arm around her. "Come on, Tag, get in the car, let's go home."

She shook out of his grip. "No, I'm not going."

Declan's face softened, trying to bargain with her now. "Tag, come on. Be serious. You're acting like a child."

She crossed her arms tighter over her chest and took a step back from him. "No. For the first time, I'm *not* acting like a child. I'm 21 years old, and I'm *not* going home with you."

He gave her a withering look. "Tag, it's only a matter of time before he throws you over. I don't know what sweet nothings he whispered in your ear in London, or if you think you're in love or what, but you can't trust men like that. You're naive—they only want one thing, and once they get it, they get bored very quickly. You're my daughter, and *I* love you and think you're special, but someone like Bas, Tag, I can guarantee you that he *doesn't* ."

Taggie began to laugh derisively. She walked past a surprised Declan to open the front door, motioning for him to leave. "I think you've insulted me enough for one day. Please get out."

To her surprise, he walked out the door without additional argument. "Whatever you may think this is, Tag, I guarantee you that it's *not* . It's only a matter of time. You're welcome back home whenever that happens."

Taggie rolled her eyes and closed and locked the door, leaning her back against it. *Well, that was one hell of a pep-talk.* She couldn't help but be amused by the idea her father seemed to have of her as some moon-eyed girl, romanced and tricked by Bas, thinking she's in love so she moves in with him, so what, so he can fuck her then throw her out on her ear after he's stolen her virtue? Taggie snorted. *I don't think I had any virtue left after the Hunt Ball.* A hormone-fueled impulse? Sure. Cohabitation based on promises of love and romance? *Definitely not.*

Taggie noticed that Declan had left the offending article in the Bar. She read it, and all the blood drained from her face. She immediately took it upstairs to show Bas.

When Declan returned to the Priory, the silence of the house tempered his rage. Declan sat alone, in the silence, in the downstairs parlor, listening to the sounds of an empty house—the clocks ticking and chiming, muffled sounds of birds outside. He felt a pang of empathy for Taggie, a young, bright person, stuck in this house alone. He supposed he couldn't entirely blame her.

When Joey and Marty arrived at the Bar later that morning to prepare for opening, they noticed there was already a line around the block. They looked at each other, "What the fuck?"

Moriah walked up behind them, crushing a cigarette under her foot. "What are you two geniuses gaping at?"

"Get a load of this," Joey snickered, pointing at the line.

Her face scrunched up in a confused frown. "What the *fuck?*"

A few minutes later, Moriah had a copy of *The Scorpion* in her hand, taken from someone outside, and she was charging up the back stairs to Bas's flat. She raised her hand to bang on the door, but noticed it was ajar. She frowned, shrugged, then pushed the door open. "Bas? Bas? Are you decent? There's something you need to—OH MY GOD! JESUS FUCK!" Moriah had clapped her hands over her eyes and spun around, facing back toward the flat door. Meanwhile, a very naked and very entangled Bas and Taggie frantically grabbed for blankets, clothes, anything to try to cover themselves. As nothing was in reach, it ended up with Taggie trying to cram herself into the back of the sofa, using Bas's naked body as a shield.

"FUCK, did no one ever teach you to KNOCK?"

"It was fucking WIDE OPEN. Did no one ever teach you to close a fucking door!?" Moriah waved the paper up above her head. 'I'm going downstairs with this, and when you two are *decent* , we need to talk about this before we open.' As she left, she slammed the flat door closed behind her, yelling one last "FUCK" as she ran down the stairs.

Taggie had put her face in her hands and peeked out at Bas from between her fingers. They both started to giggle.

“I assume she’s talking about the article?” Taggie asked.

“Mhm,” Bas murmured absently, running his hand up and down her bare side. He looked down at himself, then back up at her, a playful grin on his face, “I haven’t gone soft yet, if you care to finish what we started?

Taggie started to laugh. “You’re incorrigible,” she whispered, taking his face in her hands and wrapping her legs around his waist.

When they finally made their way downstairs, Moriah was impatiently waiting, the morning’s issue of the Scorpion spread out to the offending page. Taggie had already seen it, but it still made her blush. Moriah jammed her finger onto the headline, “Mr. and Mrs. Basil Baddingham get the Hollywood Treatment in the Harlequin Suite—Is Rutshire’s Randiest Rake is off the Market?” The headline communicated most of the content of the article—how Basil Baddingham, known womanizer, had been seen out and about London with Agatha O’Hara, daughter of Declan O’Hara, looking very cosy. While that wasn’t particularly noteworthy, the fact that they had secured one of the most storied suites in London for the night, under the name ‘Mr. and Mrs. Basil Baddingham,’ and the fact that someone had heard the hotel clerk describe them as “the most lovely set of newlyweds,” was interpreted as evidence that they had eloped in London. Taggie breathed a heavy sigh of relief—thankfully they hadn’t been followed into the club. If those photos had been printed, she would have had to move to America—she could never have shown her face in Cotchester again.

Bas chuckled, “This is definitely the most wholesome ‘scandal’ I’ve ever been involved in.”

The Bar phone began to ring. Moriah answered it. “It’s for you,” she said, holding the receiver toward Taggie, looking amused.

Taggie put the receiver to her ear, and immediately jerked it away, grimacing, as Caitlin was screaming at the top of her lungs into the line at the other end. The phone continued to ring all day.

Later that week, *The Scorpion* ran a salacious expose alleging that Rupert Campbell-Black had been part of a bisexual throuple back in his show-jumping days. It raised a veritable hellstorm for Rupert and the journalist who wrote it was credited with somehow getting the scoop of the year.

Rupert weathered the angry phone calls from Downing Street, the media firestorm it caused (most of his Tory colleagues were none too pleased with the bisexual nature of the rumors) with his usual aplomb. It gave him an immense sense of satisfaction to know that he had done this for Taggie. It also pleased him that no one knew he had done this. And he didn’t intend to tell anyone. Being selfless was new to him, and he found that he quite liked it.

This entire saga, both *The Scorpion* piece and Declan's very public meltdown in front of the Bar, was some of the juiciest drama Cotchester had seen in *months* . Local opinion was split—half thought that Bas and Taggie had staged the entire thing as a publicity stunt for the Bar and the Venturer bid. The other half were convinced that they actually *had* eloped. Of course, that was the most juicy storyline, particularly given Taggie's local reputation as a general saint and Bas's *national* reputation as a good-timing slut. The fact that Taggie worked in Bas's restaurant and was rumored to have moved in with him only fanned the flames.

It turned out that the second group was quite militant in their commitment to their version of events. It began with a single bouquet of flowers left on the bar the day the article came out. The day after, it was a small stack of a half-dozen wrapped gifts addressed to "The Baddingham's." The day after, the entire bar was covered in presents. It escalated to the point where one staff member each shift was on "bar duty" and was tasked with keeping the bar clear of gifts, as it would fill up again as quickly as they could clear it. Bas found it very amusing and would regularly stand by the pile to comment on the wrapping paper or speculate on what he thought certain gifts were, profusely thanking people as they added to the stack, a wicked twinkle in his eye. Taggie found it mortifying. She suggested donating everything to the local parish, but Moriah protested, arguing that most of the items were quite nice, and that if this kept up for a week, she could upgrade everything in her apartment.

The worst was about a week after the article, when the gift-bombing hit its peak. Moriah was rounding the corner by the bar and saw Bas, biting the back of his hand to keep from laughing, and Taggie pale as a ghost, horrified, her hands over her mouth, staring at something. On the floor in front of the bar, someone had left a stroller, with a stack of baby jumpers in the seat. Moriah started laughing so hard she couldn't breathe, doubled-over, tears streaming from her eyes. "Oh, God bless these *idiots* ," she gasped as she wiped her eyes with her apron. Struggling to keep a straight face, she turned to Taggie and Bas, "Unless there's something you would like to tell me? God knows how you two go at it, it wouldn't be for lack of trying." Now Bas was embarrassed, which sent Moriah into more peals of laughter as she walked back to the kitchen.

On Saturday, a week after she had moved in, Bas and Taggie fell back onto their backs on his bed, both laughing up at the ceiling and gasping for breath, naked, sweaty. Taggie was already running late for the kitchen. They reached out into the space between them and grasped each others' hands, entwining their fingers.

"This might not be the best timing, but I've been thinking about having a recurring specialty night downstairs—featuring particular wines—" Bas began, still looking up at the ceiling.

"—where we have a fixed menu that has been designed intentionally to complement the tasting notes of the wines?" Taggie asked.

They both looked over at each other and started to laugh.

Bas rolled over, propping himself up on his elbow to laugh and look down at her. "Yes, exactly that."

She grinned, nodding emphatically. "I think that would be an excellent idea."

“Great. I’ll mention it to Moriah. It should be slow over lunch, we can leave the minions in charge in the kitchen, and the three of us can do some planning.”

“Okay,” Taggie breathed. She looked over at the clock on the wall, noticing the time. “FUCK,” she hissed, swinging out of bed and digging around in the closet for clothes. Bas watched her, a bemused smile on his lips. *Taggie reducing her commute to a flight of stairs had made her late to the kitchen basically every day .*

That same morning, Declan had called Rupert, suggesting they meet at the Bar Sinister for lunch to talk business. Rupert agreed. He took a deep breath as he stood outside the entrance and walked in. He was still riding the high of having done Taggie a good deed with the gossip column, and that momentum carried him across the threshold. *He could be the bigger person.* Besides, she would probably be in the kitchen and he wouldn’t even see her.

He found Declan sitting at a table along the edge of the dining room, beside a window. To his alarm, he noticed that their table had a direct line of sight to a table in the back, where Bas, Taggie, and a blonde who he assumed also worked in the kitchen, sat huddled together over a stack of notebooks.

Declan noticed Rupert’s laser focus and followed his eyes, narrowing his eyes at Rupert and scoffing softly. Rupert snapped his eyes back to Declan, trying to pretend he hadn’t been staring.

“Taggie hasn’t been home in a week,” Declan added with a wry smile, looking back at his daughter at the table.

Rupert choked on his water, triggering a coughing fit. “And you’re okay with that?” Rupert asked coldly, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned back in his chair.

Declan made a face and also leaned back in his chair. “No, I absolutely am not. I had a right fit when I found out. But I will say, it’s kind of grown on me. Come on, Rupert, look at them. They act like an old married couple.” Declan gestured with his head back to their table.

Rupert rolled his eyes. *The Scorpion photographer would beg to differ.* Rupert looked back, and as if on cue, Bas reached out under the table and tapped his hand against the front of Taggie’s shin (like one would a horse that one wanted to lift its leg). Taggie automatically lifted her leg and rested it on his legs under the table. Rupert watched as Bas slid off Taggie’s trainer and began to massage her foot as she leaned back in her chair and tilted her head to the side, giving Bas a very fond half-smile that made Rupert’s heart wither. The entire time, Bas’s expression never changed, his close discussion with the blonde woman never missing a beat —as if all of this was as natural as breathing.

Declan’s eyes sparkled, and he turned to Rupert with a sincere chuckle. “She’s got the old dog trained.” In spite of himself, Rupert had to laugh, too. As he did, he felt some pressure ease from his chest. The image *was* objectively ridiculous, endearing. Looking around, Rupert noticed he and Declan weren’t the only ones who noticed, with other diners pointing, whispering, and grinning behind their hands.

“Everyone needs to get their heart broken at some point. I figure he’s a good one for it for Tag.”

Rupert scowled then, and moved to change the subject.

Rupert wanted to go back in time and kick his own stupid ass. If he wasn't such a bloody idiot with a well-earned trash reputation, Declan may never have warned him off Taggie, and he may have made a move earlier. If he had, he would never have seduced Cameron in Spain, may have never needed to start all of this Venturer business in the first place. Bas would never be in the picture.

Come on, man. A string of "if onlys" that long is just proof that you're a complete arsehole. He needed to stop living in the fucking past—he had made his poor decisions, and now he was experiencing their consequences. *I guess I should be pleased I'm nearly 40 before having to learn that lesson* , he thought sourly.

Later that same day, something unexpected happened—Rupert called the Bar and asked to speak to Bas. Rupert told Bas he'd like them to ride together again, like they always had. Bas was surprised but pleased. He and Rupert hadn't really spoken since the Hunt Ball, and he didn't think Rupert would ever talk to him again—especially since the town rumor mill had informed the entire county that Taggie was living in his flat. Bas agreed, and they made plans to meet the next afternoon. When Bas told Taggie, he saw her tense. "Are you sure he's not going to just beat the shit out of you?"

He gave her a coy smile, "Only one way to find out."

Taggie was glad they were mending fences, as she felt like she had been something of an accidental homewrecker of their friendship, which she knew had been very close and of long standing. But she also cringed to think about the two of them together. *Are they going to talk about me?* She put the thought out of her mind. *Just be happy things are going back to normal* .

When Bas and Rupert met at the stables, the first moments were awkward, but they soon fell back into their same old ease. They had been best friends for years for reasons *other than* being degenerates. As they returned to the stables from riding around Rupert's property, Rupert, not looking at Bas, asked, "So, I hear Taggie has moved into your flat?" His tone tried very hard to sound flippant and casual but was extremely strained,

Bas looked straight ahead, as a smile broke across his face. Rupert studied his friend's profile. Bas turned to Rupert, grinning at him. "Yes, she has."

Rupert regarded him seriously, silently.

Bas didn't flinch from his stare, but his grin shrunk and his expression also turned serious. "She's the best person I've ever met."

"She is," Rupert agreed, still holding Bas's gaze.

They rode for a few moments, and Rupert finally averted his eyes. "I saw *The Scorpion* . She looked happy, happier than I've ever seen her," he said.

Bas's grin returned, and he looked over at Rupert. However, his grin faltered again when he saw Rupert's pained, serious expression as he stared long and hard at his friend. "Do try to keep her that way," Rupert said, averting his eyes. They finished the rest of the ride in silence.

When they dismounted at the stables, Rupert suggested they return to their weekly rides as they had before the Hunt Ball. Bas agreed, and they kept that schedule.

They never discussed Taggie again.

Due to the increase in business, Bas posted an opening for a host position, with interviews to start immediately. The next day, an applicant was waiting at the door when Bas opened. He immediately recognized the slim, dark-haired, steel-blue-eyed, impeccably dressed young woman as the front desk clerk at the Dorchester. She held a folder, and greeted him with a bright smile.

As Elizabeth walked into the bar, Moriah caught a glimpse of her and caught her breath. "Fuck ME," she whispered from behind the bar. Taggie, who was arranging glasses beside her, followed her gaze and felt like she must be hallucinating.

Elizabeth disclosed that she had been "released" from her position at the Dorchester as a result of her "creative interpretation of company policy." When she had seen the Bar Sinister posting, she had come right away, as she had liked Bas and Taggie. She also thought it was unlikely that she would ever be able to work in a high-end hotel in London again.

"Your resume is very impressive," Taggie said.

"Yes, I know I'm overqualified, but I am serious about working here." she said, no hint of a joke in her tone.

Moriah was uncharacteristically quiet during the interview. Taggie looked over and had to suppress a chuckle. *Moriah is lovestruck.* They hired Elizabeth on the spot.

Bas said that if everyone was going to gossip anyway, they might as well enjoy themselves. They started to go out together in London, all over Rutshire. While Rupert had dated women consistently after his divorce, Beattie Johnson for two years, for example, Bas, however, had never been seen with any one woman more than 2 times in a row. As a result, any woman that had his regular attention was by necessity a fixation of local gossip. This was escalated by the fact that it was Taggie O'Hara. Bas, despite his reputation, was generally well-liked. And to know Taggie O'Hara was to admire her.

Taggie and Bas became like some type of local cryptid—people would claim to have spotted them everywhere at the same time on the same day: Bas was tucking her hair behind her ear beside the bar at the Bar Sinister. No, they were in London slow-dancing at a posh restaurant. No, they were out at the Black Stag in Cotchester, and Bas had pulled his chair around the table to put his arm around her, as if the meter of distance would kill him. No, they were at the polo match, holding hands and gazing at each other as they stomped divots. While the wedding gifts had stopped appearing on the bar, they remained the fixation of the county. Bas acting like a clump of melting butter whenever people saw them together also didn't help matters.

Meanwhile, the two of them never clarified *what* exactly they were doing or what "they" were—other than working, living, and sleeping together. When they introduced the other to

someone, they just said, 'This is Taggie,' or "This is Bas." The first time Bas introduced Taggie to someone, the other person prompted him for more information. "And Taggie is…?" Bas just replied innocently, "Taggie is the chef in the Bar Sinister kitchen," and changed the subject. There was no plan, no long-term goal, no labels. Taggie had spent so much of her life being responsible that it was exhilarating to let herself be carried away. And she loved being on Bas's arm. She felt like she stood taller and stronger, shone brighter, next to him. She had spent so much of her life being serious and responsible that it was exhilarating being with someone who was so impulsive, so carefree, so shameless, so *fun* . She was as happy as she had ever been.

She tried not to think about Rupert, and she largely succeeded.

One evening, Rupert and Cameron were out at Chadwick's, one of the more posh restaurants in Rutshire. They were seated in a dark corner, passing a relatively pleasant evening, when Cameron let out a low whistle, looking at who was being seated. Rupert turned to look, noticing that behind the waiter, Bas had strutted in, looking like he had just walked off the set of Miami Vice. He was still wearing his sunglasses, along with a bright blue shirt, the first three buttons undone, exposing his gold chain, under an impeccably tailored pastel pink suit. On anyone else, it would have been ridiculous, but with his confident stride, ever-present half-smirk, tall, muscular form, and dark features, he just looked incredibly striking. On his arm was Taggie, standing straight and confident, clad in a bright blue silk wrap-style dress with a plunging neckline that matched the shade of Bas's shirt, her hair flying loose, smoothed back from her face. Rupert couldn't help himself, he chuckled, sincerely amused. *They did look good together.*

They seemed oblivious to the fact that they had made an entrance that attracted everyone else's attention. Despite the local lore, Bas behaved himself tonight and stayed on his side of the table. Since that lunch with Declan, Rupert had studiously avoided places where he might run into them together (mostly, places where he might run into Taggie). So he hadn't ever seen them together like this. However, even Rupert had to admit that they had an aura about them that positively glowed. He could understand the local gossip now. Again, he felt himself filled with sincere happiness for Taggie, surprising himself. *She deserves to love and be loved, in public.* His eyes returned to Bas, and he laughed again, catching Cameron's eye. *Only Bas would come here in a pink fucking suit.* Rupert and Cameron watched them for a few more moments, Cameron's eyes darting nervously to Rupert to watch his expression. Noting nothing that particularly concerned her, she sighed, relaxing a bit. "Quite the outfits," she joked.

Rupert was leaning back in his chair, watching them. "I doubt they'll keep them on much beyond the first course," he said flatly, then turned to catch Cameron's eye with an impish grin on his face. Realizing he was joking, and about Taggie and Bas being shag-crazy, Cameron let out a surprised, relieved, delighted laugh that was about twice as loud as it should have been. They laughed together then, sincerely. It was a moment of catharsis for both of them.

Across the dining room, Bas was feeling very proud of himself for remaining on his side of the table. To compensate, Taggie had slid her foot forward to touch his under the table, and was slowly tracing her index finger along the back of his hand. She often found herself fixated on his hands. Bas had nice hands, but mostly when she looked at them, she thought of how they felt *on* her—strong, practised, confident—how it felt to have them in her hair, around her waist holding her in place, his thumb tracing her bottom lip. They gazed at each other across the table, and Bas rested his chin on one of his fists, a playful half-smile creeping across his face as the empty plates from their first course were collected.

Taggie tried and failed to suppress a smile, looked down at their linked hands, then back up at him, letting her eyes linger on his open buttons, his jawline. She narrowed her eyes. “I think I would like to go,” she whispered.

He raised an eyebrow, to which she responded with a slow wink.

Bas’s hand immediately shot up into the air, desperately trying to flag down a waiter.

They both got into the car and gave each other a long look. They were maybe two minutes down the road when their eyes met again. Bas immediately pulled off the road. Before he had put the car in park, Taggie was coming across the middle console. He reclined his seat all the way and moved it backwards as far as he could, ripping off his jacket and throwing it behind him into the backseat. By this point, Taggie was on him, straddling him in the seat. His hands went to his belt, but before he could unbuckle it, Taggie’s hands covered his and slowly lifted them, placing them above his head. She smirked down at him as she began to slowly undo all the buttons on his shirt, and pulled it off of him, throwing it in the backseat. *She would never get tired of looking at him.* She slowly ran her hands over his bare chest, then pulled him up to kiss her. When they came apart, she put her mouth to his ear, “You can untie me now,” as her hands worked his belt. He was only too happy to oblige.

During the nearly three months that Taggie lived in Bas’s flat, they shared many happy moments. But they each had one specific memory that they each would revisit in their minds, turning it over and over, admiring it like a valuable gem.

For Bas, it was when Taggie made dinner on a Saturday night.

A week before the night in question, Taggie and Moriah were standing side-by-side in the kitchen, scooping out the steaming, white insides of baked potatoes, hot from the oven, which they would mash with a rosemary infused cream that was steeping on the stove. This was the last dish destined for Monica Baddingham’s freezer.

“So what are you and the old ball and chain up to on Friday?” Moriah asked absently, dropping an empty potato husk into a bucket.

“Friday?” Taggie asked, confused.

“Friday,” Moriah repeated. “It’s his birthday, isn’t it?”

Taggie raised her eyebrows and shrugged, reaching for another potato. “I guess I don’t know. He hasn’t said anything.”

Moriah gave her a quizzical look. “I could be wrong, but I saw it on some Bar paperwork I was going through this morning. It’s definitely Friday.”

Taggie scowled at the potatoes, confused. Bas was going to be gone Thursday night, all day Friday, and until late Saturday for an away polo tournament in the next county. He had volunteered to play with a different team, as a friend said they needed a #3, as their usual was out—injured. She hadn’t thought much about it. But knowing it was over his birthday and that he hadn’t told her troubled her. She suddenly felt a pang of anxiety and insecurity. *What if there was no polo match? What if there was another woman in the next county he’d rather debauch over his birthday weekend?* Her father’s harsh words came back to her, predicting Bas would tire of her and throw her over for someone else. With a sinking feeling, she remembered the petite blonde at the Bar the day after the Hunt Ball, the parade of women sneaking down from his flat when she had first started working there. They had made no commitment to each other or even made an effort to define what the fuck they were doing, but the idea of someone else taking her place, made Taggie feel queasy and her palms sweat.

She and Moriah finished the potatoes in silence, and Taggie drove them to Monica Baddingham. The last of the trays arranged in the freezer, Monica wrote Taggie a check and walked her to the door, profusely thanking her. As they stood on the front step, Taggie took a deep breath. “Monica? This may be a strange question, but is it Bas’s birthday on Friday?”

Monica gave Taggie a long look. “Yes, it is. Hadn’t he told you?”

Taggie’s cheeks flushed, embarrassed, but not deterred. “No, he hadn’t told me.”

Monica sighed and gave Taggie a pitying look. “The Baddingham family is not an easy family, and for obvious reasons, it was hardest for Bas. From what I understand, Bas’s birthday was always treated more as a family day of mourning than celebration. Ever since I’ve known him, he’s militantly refused to even acknowledge it.”

Taggie thanked Monica and drove back to the Bar, turning over Moncia’s words with a pang. As she put the car in park, a sly, determined smile spread over her face. *I have work to do.*

Moriah knew Taggie was up to something—leaving the kitchen more frequently to drive around to the Cotchester specialty stores, calling the Bar’s suppliers to adjust the orders, squirreling away chunks of meat wrapped in brown paper and bundles of herbs in the back corner of the fridge. On Friday morning, Taggie asked Moriah if she could stay late to help her with an experiment after closing. After the doors were locked and everyone else had been sent home, Moriah watched, intrigued, as Taggie pulled out a stack of metal parts from the freezer and began assembling what she recognized as a meat grinder. Together, the two of them chopped and ground hunks of beef, pork, pork fat and using their hands, mixed in red wine, garlic, black pepper, a dash of nutmeg, then pumped the tacky mass into casings. Moriah watched Taggie as they chopped, ground, mixed, and packaged. She seemed elated, a positively gooey smile on her face, handling these sausages as if they were some string of sacred beads. About to make a dick joke, Moriah asked what they were making and why. When Taggie replied in a soft voice, Moriah thought better of the joke. Moriah chuckled to herself and shook her head in amusement as Taggie piled the links into a tray and slid it into the fridge. *This girl’s got it bad.*

The next day, Moriah agreed to manage the kitchen and call her down if they needed anything. First thing in the morning, Taggie set to work in Bas's flat. She rolled out pastry dough, cooked and seasoned minced beef, boiled eggs, diced olives and onions, crushed garlic and chopped parsley, whisked egg wash. By the end of the morning, her fingertips smelled hopelessly of garlic and were stained a light shade of green.

Finally, after the restaurant downstairs had closed, Taggie heard footsteps on the flat stairs that she knew had to be Bas. He came through the door, still wearing his polo kit and was absolutely *filthy* . She swallowed slowly as she took him in. Mud was splattered all over his gold jersey and smeared over the thigh of his snug white pants. He even had mud in his hair. It was very different from his normal sleek look, and she found herself quite moved by it. His eyes lit up when he saw her, as he took off his boots by the door, and a wide smile crept across his face when he noticed her eyes roving over him, looking quite piqued. She noticed that he had the beginning of what looked like a black eye. She reached up to touch it. "What happened?"

"Caught the end of a mallet."

"Mmm," she murmured, distracted.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall, drinking her in. "I need to clean up," he looked down at himself to emphasize the mud splatter. He looked back up at her, his gaze steady. "The shower *does* hold two."

In Taggie's mind, he was already naked and on his back on the hardwood floor of the foyer. She ran her eyes over the grainy texture of the dried, grey mud caked on his forehead, on his neck, on his forearms. She imagined what it would feel like against her face, against her bare skin. She released an audible and very resigned sigh that made Bas laugh. "No, you go. I have something for supper that I'll get ready." Seeing a sly smile spread across his face, she rolled her eyes and laughed, "Something that *isn't* me. Go, I'll set that up."

He sauntered to the back of the flat, and Taggie immediately turned on the oven and started pulling trays out of the fridge.

Bas was exhausted when he came back that night. He also knew he was disgusting. He knew he should have showered and changed before coming back, but he was eager to get back to Cotchester, to Taggie. He thought she would probably not be impressed with him tracking in mud everywhere. But to his surprise and immense pleasure, it seemed like she would have very much liked him to track it *everywhere.* He was a bit disappointed when she declined his invitation. *Usually she's the one dragging me to the shower.*

As he toweled off and pulled on boxers (*anything else would be a waste—it was unlikely to stay on long anyway*), he could smell something *amazing.* He was ravenous, as he also hadn't stopped to eat on the way back.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he got to the edge of the kitchen, flabbergasted. The table before him was set for two, a bottle of red in the middle, and it was absolutely filled with food— specifically chorizos, empanadas, chimichurri, fresh bread, grilled vegetables. Taggie stood behind the table, beaming up at him.

He approached the table and stabbed a sausage with a fork and held it up in front of him. Taggie walked around the table to stand beside him. "Did you *make* all of this?" he

whispered.

She smiled up at him, nodding. She found him incredibly endearing—an olive-skinned Adonis, his dark hair wet, standing there completely dumbfounded, in his underwear, a sausage speared on his fork.

"How? *Why?*" he asked.

"I found out yesterday was your birthday. And I wanted to do something for you."

For a moment, he didn't speak, staring intently at the chorizo skewered on his fork.

Taggie's stomach dropped. *Oh my God, I've done something wrong, it's not good enough, I've offended him by mentioning his birthday* . "I know it won't be as good as you're used to, as I've never done any of this before, so it's a trial run, but I hope—"

He turned to her, shaking his head, his eyes warm, earnest. *A little misty?* "No one has ever done something like this for me before," he whispered.

She wrapped her arms around his bare chest and smiled up at him. "Well, now I have."

He barked out a tense, awkward laugh and sat down, pulling her into his lap, wrapping his arms around her and resting his chin on her shoulder, as he began to fill the plate in front of them.

Everything was *perfect* , as good as he had ever had in Argentina, in London. He knew he complimented her so much that night that she started to disbelieve him. The two of them ate until they were both nearly sick, then cleaned everything up, her in her jeans and his dark green jumper, him in his underwear. They grinned like idiots at each other while they did dishes side by side in his sink.

As usual, they both went to bed naked that night (Pajamas at this point were unnecessary, all pretense of modesty gone. They just slowed them down.). To Taggie's surprise (and mild disappointment), when Bas reached for her and pulled her in, kissing her as passionately as he ever had, he didn't move to transition to anything else. He just pulled her to him and rolled over onto his back so her head and chest rested on his. He pressed his face into the top of her head, stroking her hair. Content, she soon fell asleep. Bas, meanwhile, stayed awake for a long time, holding her to him, thinking about the time, detail, *care* that went into that meal and fighting a lump in his throat for a reason he couldn't understand.

For Taggie, it was a lazy Sunday afternoon—the next day, in fact.

The two of them were on Bas's sofa, watching a polo match on television. Taggie, wearing his green jumper, had asked him to explain the rules. He was on his side, his arm under her neck, while she laid on her back beside him. A bowl of salt and vinegar crisps rested on her stomach. Bas said something that made her laugh, and the movement threatened to topple the bowl of crisps onto the floor. Chuckling, Bas caught the bowl before it fell and leaned across her to set it on the table beside the sofa. As he settled back into his original position, Taggie looked up at him, her hand against the side of his face, tracing his cheekbone, the edge of his blooming shiner, with her thumb. He pressed his face into her palm and leaned down and kissed her. They kissed, quite tenderly, for a few minutes. Then, Bas slowly unbuttoned her

jeans and slid his hand inside, both of them moaning softly when he touched her. She rolled over onto her side, to face him, putting one of her legs up over his. She pulled him in to kiss him again, gasping against his mouth as he slid two fingers inside of her, continuing to stroke her with his thumb. She bit her bottom lip and pressed her forehead to his, moving her hips against his hand. She took his face in both of her hands and kissed him rather desperately, as the ripples of an orgasm pulsed through her. She relaxed into him as he removed his hand from her and brushed her hair away from her face. They laid like that for a few moments, small smiles on both of their faces. His coffee-brown eyes were uncharacteristically soft. "You are so beautiful," he whispered, their noses touching. *I love you* , she thought. The words took her by surprise. She exhaled deeply, feeling like she was melting in a very pleasant way. She kissed him again and started to work at his belt.

A few minutes later, both of their trousers around their ankles, jumpers still in place, he was on top of her, moving slowly, his mouth pressed to her temple, a hand in her hair. He murmured her name in her ear, and her heart felt so full that she wanted to cry. One hand in his hair, the other pressed against his back, she turned her head to kiss him. She felt a thrill run through her at the thought of it— *I love him* . It made her feel invincible. And a little afraid.

Taggie thought about that afternoon constantly, trying to decide if that was actually how she felt. *Maybe their constant fucking had altered her brain chemistry. Made her crazy.*

She was ruminating on it again one afternoon while she mindlessly washed and dried pint glasses behind the bar. She looked up and noticed Bas across the dining room, making conversation with a table looking for a wine recommendation. He leaned forward casually, his hands on the back of an empty chair at the table, dressed in a charcoal suit with a purple tie. She watched as he ran a hand through his hair, smiled. He was so easy, engaging, the perfect person to run a place like this. She smiled to herself and looked back down at the glass she was drying. She looked up, and he was gone from the table. She looked over to the wine rack on the other side of the room. He was resting his chin on one hand, thoughtfully looking through the bottles. Choosing one, he turned, frowning down at the label. Then he looked up and directly at the bar—at her. He saw her watching him, a soft smile on her face. A jolt of electricity zapped up Taggie's spine as their eyes met, and her breath caught in her throat. He gave her a small smile and a wink and went back to the table. She smiled down into the glass, then froze, remembering, *Sex is just for fun. It doesn't mean anything* . She suddenly felt embarrassed and a pit of disappointment open up in her stomach. She pictured herself on that roller coaster again, launching off the track into the abyss. *Get it together, Agatha. It doesn't matter what you feel. For him, this is casual, normal. "It doesn't mean anything."*

Bas felt like a madman.

He was absolutely *obsessed* with her. He had always cycled through women, never finding himself particularly attached to or compelled by anyone in particular.

But Taggie—he wanted to see her, touch her all the time. Whenever he knew she was in the room, he felt like there was some sort of magnet that pulled him toward her, compelled

him to find her with his eyes. He had memorized all the angles of her face, the gradations in color in her hair, the different tones of her laugh, how she would tap her left foot absently while she thought about something. When they slept together—how her cheeks and neck would flush, how she would bite her bottom lip or whisper his name when she was about to climax. Just the thought of it made him crazy.

He couldn't keep his hands off of her. He largely kept it decent at the Bar (especially after Moriah gave him a stern talking-to), but once they were alone, he became fixated on getting his hands in her long, thick hair, tasting her, touching her. It didn't matter—dressed to the nines at dinner, in a jumper and old jeans on the sofa, covered in flour and splattered with sauce in the kitchen, naked and asleep next to him in bed—he was desperate for her in all of her forms. He felt a bit bad, actually. He felt like he barely let her have a moment's peace. He couldn't get enough of her. He felt like he was 16 again. It didn't help that whenever he was starting to work himself into a state, he would look at her and would often catch her already looking at him, a twinkle in her eye, like she knew what he was thinking and was just as keen as he was.

To look up and see her watching him with her bright blue eyes, catch his eye and smile, felt like he was standing in a beam of the warmest sunlight. He felt like he might explode with the delight of it. He had never felt anything like it.

With less than a month to go before the final application deadline, the Venturer contingent hosted a gala, targeted at sporting programming. They not only wanted to solidify the support of local teams and fans, but also of important national figures who would undersign and support their approach to sports broadcasting, their spectrum of programming suggestions, etc. As a result, Rupert mobilized a range of his connections through his Minister of Sport position as well as through his show jumping connections. He had also relied on Bas to mobilize the local hunt and polo club as well as use his national and international polo connections for any additional social capital. They decided to host it at the Cotchester Arms, the same place as the Hunt Ball. While Bas and Rupert never addressed it, they both found it ironic that the location they would choose to co-organize an event that represented their reconciliation would be the same place where their friendship had collapsed. The Bar also catered the event, with Taggie, Moriah, and Bas carefully curating the menu.

As the entire Venturer group schmoozed with these important players, Rupert and Cameron inevitably ended up in the same small group circles as Bas and Taggie. Bas in an all-white suit and white shirt, Taggie in a floor-length, green satin number. Rupert noticed how they always touched. Even if their arms weren't linked or Bas's arm wasn't around Taggie (and it usually was), their elbows just touched, Taggie's hand would come up to press lightly at his lower back. It was like they were attached at the hip. Rupert also noticed the pride with which Bas introduced Taggie and how she looked up at him. Seeing the two of them together, talking about food, polo, wine, and restaurants, Rupert could appreciate that they were better suited than he would have originally thought. Bas, for his part, seemed appropriately enchanted with Taggie. And on his arm, she wasn't a shy, neglected child in the shadows. She had presence, she lit up the room, she was powerful and confident. Again, in spite of himself, Rupert was happy for her. For both of them, really. A rueful smile bloomed across his face. *I might actually become a halfway decent person if I'm not careful.*

Eventually, dinner was cleared, trays with drinks began to circulate, and the DJ they hired began to play music. The younger and more energetic (and drunk) of the crowd immediately filtered to the floor. When Like a Prayer began to play, Taggie gave Bas a meaningful look, and he scampered after her to the dance floor, a mischievous grin on his face. They held each other like they shared a skin, their cheeks pressed together, arms around each other—clearly talking, smiling into each others' faces and necks the whole time. *A far cry from Cameron and I*, Rupert thought sourly. When Lady in Red began to play, Cameron pulled Rupert to the floor. "I love this song!" she exclaimed. Rupert swallowed heavily, but followed her, taking her in his arms. As they danced, he tried to keep his eyes on Cameron. He really did try. But he couldn't help himself, *he had to look* . He lifted his eyes and started, clenching Cameron to him, when he immediately caught Taggie's eyes. She was looking over Bas's shoulder, staring at him with a heat and an intensity that both shocked and stirred him. He held her gaze. Rupert felt himself holding his breath, and he only looked away and exhaled when he heard Cameron yelp in surprise because of how tightly he was clenching her against him. When he looked back up, Taggie's face was in Bas's neck and the moment was broken. Rupert's pulse pounded in his ears, and he struggled to focus on Cameron, on anything. He looked back again, feeling desperate, but Taggie was engrossed in Bas. *Maybe he had imagined it all.*

He hadn't imagined it all. Taggie had fought the urge to look at him all night. She was very proud of herself. But once *that song* began to play and she saw him and Cameron edge out onto the floor, she couldn't help herself. She *needed* to look. That old thread that connected them pulled at her with a visceral strength that she wasn't prepared to resist. At first, she was embarrassed when he caught her staring. But when his eyes held hers, that same old longing in them, she found it impossible to look away. It had been so long since she had looked at him — *really* looked at him. Her eyes caressed his face, taking in the angles of his cheekbones, the waves in his dark hair, the intensity of his brown eyes. His image had dulled in her mind over the past months, but now, seeing him just meters away, he seemed brighter, more striking than ever. *If only he wouldn't look at her like that , or at all, really.* Looks like that stirred something in her, something she wanted to squash and be able to forget. Rupert's eyes darted away from her, and she pressed her face into Bas's neck, inhaling deeply the scent of his aftershave, and the smell of citrus, woods, sage grounded her. His arms tightened around her, and she relaxed into him.

About halfway through Lady in Red, Bas felt Taggie freeze, and her arms clutch him tightly. A moment later, he felt her relax and press her face into his neck. He didn't give it a second thought until after slowly turning them around, he realized he was staring straight at Cameron Cook across an empty space in the middle of the dance floor. She was looking at him, similarly confused and alert, as she danced in Rupert's arms. As Cameron and Bas's eyes met, they both silently made the realization that something must have passed between their respective dance partners. Bas and Cameron shared a look, then both frowned, looking away. Cameron, not sure if she was being paranoid, felt that Rupert was colder, more distant, distracted for the rest of the evening. He was also eager to get off of the dance floor. It left Cameron feeling hollow, the old anxiety creeping back in.

Taggie, however, just held Bas closer, which reassured him.

Now on the edge of the dance floor, Rupert couldn't help himself. His eyes were hungrily glued to Taggie and Bas. He had been doing so well, been so mature about it all, but one look from her had sent him into a complete tailspin. He had almost resigned himself to letting her go, but *that look* . It had made him hope again. And that hope made him feel feral.

Another song played over the speakers, and Taggie put one arm around Bas's neck and pressed her other hand flat against his chest, his hands linked together at her waist. They pressed their foreheads together.

I think we're alone now

There doesn't seem to be anyone around

I think we're alone now

The beating of our hearts is the only sound

Taggie pressed her nose to Bas's once, twice, and then Bas kissed her. *It was hard to look away from the two of them. They were incandescent.* The thought filled Rupert with a deep bitterness, the intensity of which startled him.

The day after the gala, the local polo club had an intra-club "friendly" match to end their season, as fall was well underway. As usual, Taggie and Moriah were catering. Given the success of the previous evening, most of the Venturer crew and some of their gala guests came out in support of the polo club—a show of solidarity with local sport.

Before the match began, Taggie and Moriah set up the tents. Moriah had gone back to the cars to get another cooler. As Taggie adjusted trays on the table, she felt two strong hands encircle her waist. She smiled and leaned backwards into the solid, tall, body behind her. She tilted her head to the side, presenting her neck for Bas's mouth. "You're very bad," she whispered with a chuckle.

The hands tightened around her waist, and she felt the body go rigid. Then, she heard a strangled "*Tag"* from behind her. She realized it wasn't Bas at all. *It was Rupert* .

She spun around and took two steps back, her eyes wild. She could still feel, hot on her waist, the imprint of where his hands had been. The skin on her neck felt electric where his breath had touched her. *What the fuck?*

He was looking at her, feeling just as disconcerted. Rupert had known Taggie would be under the tent, and he told himself he just wanted to talk to her, finally apologize for the Hunt Ball, make amends, as he had with Bas. But seeing her in that tent, so close, no one else between them, all the lies he had told himself fell away. Before he fully realized what he was doing, he had reached out his hands and slowly placed them on her waist, much like he had in the Priory kitchen months ago. He hadn't thought about what would happen next, but her reaction took him entirely by surprise. When he felt the warmth, the softness, the solidness of her lean back against him, he felt like a spool of thread that someone had kicked down a hill —unraveling, adrift. Then, the sight of her neck, a flush creeping over her skin—he thought his head might explode. If she hadn't spun out and away from him, he would have ravished her right there in that tent. But when she *did* spin out and away, looking utterly shocked, he

realized with a sinking feeling that she must have thought he was Bas. *Of course she fucking thought it was Bas .*

Taggie felt a flush creeping up her neck—partially embarrassment for being so brazen with the wrong person (particularly *him*), partially anger that he would sneak up on and touch her like that, and partially a third thing that she didn't want to admit.

She struggled to form words, as apparently did Rupert. So they both stood there, looking at each other, getting redder and redder in the face. Finally, Taggie blurted out, "You sh-shouldn't do that," and stormed out of the tent. She immediately found Moriah, determined to stay at her side for the rest of the match and not humiliate herself further.

Bas had been looking for Rupert and spotted him heading for the white tent beside the pitch. Bas followed after him and saw the entire interaction with Taggie play out, just out of their line of sight at the corner of the tent. It was clear that it was a case of mistaken identity (at least on Taggie's part), as he heard Taggie's words, saw her surprise, and watched her storm off. In the past, he would have found the scene amusing or pitiful—Rupert clearly still desperate for her, Taggie still so easily undone by him. But not today. Today, the sight of the two of them, looking so much like they did back in the Priory kitchen that summer, made him feel like the hands of God himself were around Bas's neck, strangling him.

Watching the two of them, standing an arm's length apart under that white tent, their eyes wild, their breath coming fast, a flush that he recognized creeping up Taggie's neck, it suddenly hit him, like a bolt of lightning from the sky— *He, Bas Baddingham, was in love with Taggie O'Hara.* He felt like a complete idiot for not having realized this earlier. *Of course he was in love with her.* Bas took in the way her long ponytail laid against her back, the tic of the muscle in her jaw as she clenched it, the edge of her shirt that had come untucked from her jeans. *He loved her so much that it hurt to look at her, like looking directly at the sun.* He was horrified to find himself so overcome that he could feel a lump rising in his throat, and a deep ache in his chest.

He was in love with Taggie O'Hara.

And Taggie O'Hara was in love with Rupert Campbell-Black.

8. Things Fall Apart

That day, Bas played the worst polo game of his life.

I must be having a panic attack.

He felt like an utter idiot. He had told himself that he and Taggie were just having fun, her moving into his flat was just a stupid impulse, their constant shagging, how he always needed to be near her, all of it—it was just something casual, fun, nothing he hadn't done before. *But he was wrong. He was so fucking blind, so stupid. Falling in love with her, while she carried a flame for someone else.* The image of her and Rupert staring each other down under that tent, her hands tensing in his hair when Rupert and Cameron saw them together in the Priory the day after her birthday, the image of her and Rupert staring each other down in the Priory kitchen months ago—the night that started all of this.

Then he thought about how Taggie felt in his hands, the shine in her blue eyes when she smiled at him, how he had twisted her hair around his finger that morning, watching her sleep. *It was all over . There had never even been an "it" to begin with. She had always been someone else's, really.*

He felt like he was being smothered. His distress even upset his pony, which spent most of the match crab-walking sideways across the pitch, refusing to follow Bas's cues. His team would have been better playing down a man than having him on the field.

Taggie noticed something was off with Bas at the match. She didn't really understand polo, but she knew enough to know that he was playing *very* poorly. After the match, as usual, she found him, and they stood side-by-side as he chatted with the other members of the club. She noticed with a sinking feeling that for the first time ever, really, he didn't automatically reach for her, press her to him. When she reached out to touch him, he shrank from her, like her hands burned him. She felt a tightness in her chest. *Something is wrong.* She kept a studious distance from Rupert for the entire day, trying to keep him in her peripheral vision so she could avoid even coming near him.

It was evening by the time they got back to the Bar. Taggie drove separately from Bas and helped Moriah unload and put away the catering equipment. In another break from routine, Bas didn't stop by the kitchen to help. Instead, he headed right up to the flat. When Taggie came upstairs, he was sitting on the sofa, a bottle of whiskey open beside him. He was quiet and seemed sad. She had never seen him like this. When she asked him if anything was wrong, he forced a tight smile, said no, and told her to go to bed without him, as he still had some calls to make.

Taggie woke up, hours later, and he still hadn't come to bed. Even more worried now, she pulled on the first thing she grabbed on the floor—his dark green jumper—and padded out to the living room. She saw him lying on the sofa, still wearing his polo kit from the day, staring up at the ceiling, his eyes wide open—clearly still awake.

Taggie looked at him. “Bas? Is something wrong?” When he didn’t answer her, she started to panic.

“Have I done something wrong?” she whispered tentatively, her chest tight with anxiety.

Bas sat up slowly, as serious as she had ever seen him, which did nothing to soothe her. *He looked exhausted.*

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Taggie, I love you.”

He loves me. She felt something warm and bright rise up and bloom inside of her. A smile began to spread across her mouth. But when Bas refused to meet her eyes, his expression dark, she felt that warm shape freeze and shatter. The smile died on her lips.

“Bas, then why—”

“I saw you and Rupert under the tent.”

Taggie’s breath caught in her throat. “But nothing happened, *I thought it was you* , I—”

Bas met her eyes now, his posture slumped, his brown eyes flat, his tone hollow. “I know. But I’m not blind. It’s always been Rupert for you—it is now and it always has been. It always will be.”

“But Bas, that’s not—he’s not—he’s with—”

“For now. Once that *fucking* application is in, he’ll be free to let Cameron go, and we both know he’ll come straight for you. I won’t make you choose between us. It’s not fair to you.” *It’s not fair to me* .

They remained in tense silence for a moment, then Bas dropped his eyes to stare at his hands.

“Bas, you—”

“And if I did, I don’t think you would choose me,” he whispered. *And I won’t be able to survive it when you don’t.*

“So that’s it? You don’t want to hear what I have to say? What if I lo—”

“Tag, don’t,” he whispered. “Please don’t say something you can’t take back, something you don’t mean. For both our sakes.”

“But what if I *do* mean it? What if I don’t *want* to take it back?”

“I don’t believe that you *do* mean it, that you *can* mean it,” he whispered hoarsely, putting his face in his hands.

“Bas, I—”

“I’ve *seen* it, Tag. I’ve seen the two of you together. It’s been *months* , and it’s still like a fucking magnet between the two of you.”

She felt like she would choke to death on the lump rising in her throat. She started to tremble. *This isn't happening.*

"But I—"

"I'm going to Argentina."

"What? *Why?"*

"My father has always wanted me to come work with his polo stock. And I'm going to go. I'll stay three months, maybe longer. I won't come back until the bid has been long decided. By that point, Rupert will have set Cameron loose, and I won't have to be around for what happens next."

"What about the Bar?" Taggie whispered, blanching.

"It doesn't need me. Between you, Moriah, and Elizabeth, I'm superfluous. Who knows—I might sell it. Stay in Argentina. I don't know yet."

They sat in silence for a full minute, Bas's face in his hands, Taggie staring at the sofa, her mind replaying the afternoon they had spent on it when she realized she loved him. She felt a wave of panic rising in her chest. Just 24 hours ago, they had been happy, normal. *This couldn't be real.*

"When will you leave?" she whispered.

"Thursday. The same day Cameron and your father head to Ireland."

"Bas, that's in three days." *I think I'm going to die. Oh my god, I am going to die.*

He didn't respond.

"Will you please talk to me?" she begged. Her head was spinning. She felt like the edges of her vision were getting spotty and she might pass out.

He was leaving. He loved her, and he was leaving . He wouldn't even believe that she could love him. Because of fucking Rupert and that old fucking thread. She *had* ruined it, but just not in the way she had thought she would. *If only she had told him she loved him when she first realized it. Maybe none of this would be happening. She could have prevented it all. But instead she had fucked it all up.*

Finally, he lifted his face to look at her, his brown eyes serious, holding hers. "Tag, I can't do *this* anymore," he whispered, gesturing between the two of them with his index finger.

She felt like she was made of ice. "Okay," she whispered. Without another word, she turned and put on her trainers by the door, not bothering to tie them, and left the flat, closing the door after her.

Taggie staggered down the back stairs to the Bar, clutching the banister. It hurt to look at *everything* —the wine rack, the corner table in the dining room where they would sit during slow shifts, the kitchen. *She couldn't be here, anywhere but here.* Not sparing a thought for the fact that she was only wearing Bas's oversized green jumper that barely covered her ass, she blindly drifted out of the front door. As she walked, she hugged herself and shivered, chilled by both her shock and the cold night air. She felt numb; the last few minutes felt

unreal. *They had to be* . By the time she reached Moriah's flat, the reality of what Bas's words meant had started to set in, and her body was wracked with heaving sobs as she pounded on Moriah's door with both fists.

Moriah ripped open the door, half-asleep and holding a cricket bat, prepared to threaten away the deranged intruder beating down her door. Seeing that it was a hysterical Taggie, wearing only an oversized jumper, her shoes untied, she immediately dropped the bat and pulled her inside. A t-shirt-clad Elizabeth, standing just behind Moriah, closed the door behind them.

Bas sat frozen on the sofa for hours, waiting for Taggie to come back up from the Bar. He kept replaying in his mind the look on her face when he told her he loved her—how she had lit up with joy, then utterly collapsed a second later. *I'm fucking worse than Rupert.* He finally got up and went downstairs to look for her. He started to panic when he didn't see her in any of the usual places. When he couldn't find her in the un-usual places, he really began to panic. *She wasn't even dressed. Where could she go?* The only place he could think of was Moriah's flat down the block. Still in his polo kit, he jogged to Moriah's flat, where he noticed there was a light on inside. He banged on the front door, his eyes wild, heart pounding, until he heard footsteps. Moriah opened the door, cricket bat in hand. When she saw it was him, she stepped out onto the front step, pulling the door shut behind her, still holding the bat in her hand.

She pointed her index finger in his face, "You get the *fuck* off of my step."

"Is she here? I just want to make sure that she's—"

Moriah pressed the end of the bat into the center of his chest and threw all of her weight against it, pushing him backwards. "If you want to have a staff to run your restaurant tomorrow, or *ever again* , you will get the *fuck* off of my step *now.*"

She turned to walk back inside, spinning around on her heel just before she grasped the doorknob. "How could you *do* that? To *her?*" she whispered, her face twisted in sincere disbelief.

"Moriah, I—"

"I haven't known you long, Basil Baddingham, but I can tell you that this is the *worst* thing you have *ever* done," she spat, slamming and locking the door behind her.

He walked slowly back to his flat with his shoulders slumped, defeated and ashamed of himself.

The next morning, Bas came downstairs and none of the staff, kitchen or front of house, would even look at him. When he tried to address Elizabeth behind the host stand, she didn't even register that she heard a thing. She looked right through him as if he was invisible. A throat cleared behind him, and he turned to see Moriah standing in the middle of the bar, her arms crossed over her chest. "I think it's best if you spend the next few days packing for your grand tour, maybe saying goodbye to your ponies. We don't need you here."

He didn't try to argue. He just walked toward the back stairs. Moriah intercepted him just before the staircase. "I've left boxes outside the flat door. I want all of her things in them by end of day."

Taggie had insisted she needed to go back to the Bar that morning to help in the kitchen, but Moriah refused to let her out of her flat. “If you come in looking like this, everyone will mutiny and kill him on the spot. I have everything under control. You are not to leave this couch all day.”

The day passed in a blur. When Moriah came back from the Bar, Taggie had managed to right herself a bit. She was still miserable, but not hysterical. She just felt like there was a gaping open wound where her chest should be.

Moriah told her she could stay as long as she needed, which Taggie knew she meant. But Taggie didn’t want to be here. As kind as Moriah was, she still reminded her of the kitchen—of everything. She also couldn’t leave the house for a walk without running into someone who might ask her about Bas, the Bar. She wanted to be alone and be able to sit outside and stare up at the sky where no one could see or comment on the mess she was. There was only one place where she knew that would be possible.

“I think I’d like you to take me back to the Priory.” Taggie grimaced, remembering that all of her favorite things were still in Bas’s flat. *She would just have to make do.*

Moriah gave her a small smile and pulled her in for a hug. “Of course I will take you back to the Priory.”

When they walked out to Moriah’s car, Taggie saw it was full of boxes. She furrowed her brow and looked to Moriah, who was looking quite smug. “I made him pack it all up today.” Taggie started to laugh, then cry again, as she walked around the car to hug her friend.

Declan was surprised when he saw a car pull into the Priory driveway. He was even more surprised when he saw Taggie get out of the passenger seat and start unloading boxes. Confused, he walked towards her, “Tag—” The words died on his lips when he caught sight of her face. She didn’t have to say anything. He knew what had happened. He saw her face work, trying to maintain composure, summon a smile, but it promptly collapsed. She dropped the box she was holding and hid her face in her hands as she started to sob. Declan took his eldest daughter in his arms and held her, stroking her hair and letting her cry into his shoulder while the tall blonde girl who was driving the car, who Declan recognized from the Bar, continued to unload the boxes and carried them inside.

Declan couldn’t say he was surprised it had turned out this way. *He would save the “I told you so” for another day* , he thought, feeling validated. Bas Baddingham was a rake—he presumed Taggie had either caught him with someone else, or he had simply grown tired of his daughter. Either way, this outcome was inevitable—he himself had warned her.

Moriah refused to let Taggie come to work the next day. In fact, she said that it would probably be best if she stayed away until Thursday—both of them knowing what that meant. Taggie stayed at the Priory on Tuesday, walking around the grounds, sobbing dejectedly. Thinking about the small scar he had on the back of his right shoulder, the vibration of him

laughing into her neck, the smell of his cologne. She was making herself insane. She didn't want to go near a kitchen, but being outside in the quiet, her mind filled in the silence with the sounds of him, images of him. Finally, after her fifth hour of walking aimlessly around the Priory grounds, feeling like she was very slowly being torn into pieces, she came inside and began to make crumpets.

Declan came downstairs a couple of hours later, took one look inside the Priory kitchen, and immediately called Bar Sinister. Bas answered the phone, and Declan grimaced. "Put the blonde on." Bas cringed on the other end of the phone and hunted up Moriah. Declan explained the situation to Moriah, and she assured him she would come to the Priory that night as soon as the kitchen was closed. True to her word, she arrived and headed right back to the kitchen. Taggie was sitting beside the table, head in her hands, surrounded by literally hundreds of crumpets, flour sprayed everywhere, a mountain of dirty mixing bowls filling up in the sink, overflowing to the counter, all over the floor.

"Christ almighty," Moriah swore, her eyes wide, taking in the carnage that engulfed the room.

Taggie looked up, saw Moriah, and gave her a half-hearted smile. "I'm losing my mind," she whispered.

Moriah came over to sit beside Taggie, putting her arm around her. "I could make him stay out of the kitchen, if you wanted to come back tomorrow? They're doing the send-off party, and we could use the extra hands. And I'll be honest, you having a full-on emotional breakdown in a corner of the Bar kitchen during the dinner rush is better than whatever the fuck this is," Moriah said with a tense chuckle, waving her hand around the kitchen. Taggie laughed weakly, resting her head on Moriah's shoulder.

"Worst case, we just put you in the supply closet with the lights off to collect yourself," she joked, pressing the side of her head to Taggie's. "Elizabeth does it all the time when she's feeling overstimulated." They both laughed now.

"Okay," Taggie said, her eyes a bit brighter, her voice a bit stronger.

"Okay," Moriah repeated, looking pleased. "I'll come get you in the morning."

When she left the Priory, Moriah went straight back to the Bar Sinister, using her key to let herself back in, and marched up to Bas's flat, pounding on the door until he appeared, half-dressed, disheveled, and clearly drunk.

She regarded him evenly, her eyes hostile. "Taggie is coming in to the kitchen tomorrow. She needs it. I'll go get her at 10, and I don't want you downstairs at all before 11. And under *no circumstances* are you to enter that kitchen tomorrow. I don't care if the building is on fire and we're all locked in, screaming for help. *You* stay *out* ."

"Fine," he snapped, slamming the door in her face.

"Fine," Moriah whispered sarcastically, to the closed door.

True to his word, the next morning when Moriah arrived with an exhausted-looking Taggie, Bas was nowhere to be seen in the Bar. The staff greeted Taggie cheerfully, no one giving her pitying looks or asking her how she was doing (Moriah had given them all a stern talking-to). Moriah integrated her right back into the kitchen workflow, and Taggie found the routine, the chaos of the kitchen to be soothing. *Moriah was right, this was so much better than stress-making crumpets.* By the afternoon, she found herself laughing again. She still felt like she had been hit by a truck, but she could bear it. She tricked herself into believing that maybe she had imagined it all—things felt so *normal.*

Moriah noticed that Bas appeared downstairs around noon, studiously avoiding the kitchen. While she was pleased that Taggie seemed stable and that he was giving her space, the whole situation both confused her and pissed her off, given how googly-eyed they had been for each other until literally a few days ago. All Taggie would tell her was that Bas had ended things and that it was all her fault, which Moriah strongly doubted. *At least he seems to have some sense of shame about it all.*

Taggie was enjoying her warm sense of denial when she left the kitchen to use the bathroom mid-afternoon. She came through the kitchen double-doors with a smile on her face and looked up. *There he was* . He was holding a bottle of wine and a corkscrew, clearly intended for a customer, not more than a meter from her. Her smile froze on her face, and her heart stopped. Bas's eyes went wide, his face went white, and he dropped the bottle, which shattered at his feet, covering his brown leather shoes with a red wave of liquid. Everyone in the dining room turned and stared. Taggie had no idea how long they stood like that, staring each other down. Her eyes took in the lines of his face, the dark circles under his eyes, and she felt her heart twist in her chest. Out of nowhere, Elizabeth appeared beside her, and pulled her away, careful to avoid the pieces of broken glass and spreading pool of wine on the floor. Elizabeth patted Taggie's arm and led her to the bathroom, waiting outside the door. When Taggie finally emerged, shaky and red-eyed. Elizabeth looked her up and down and matter-of-factly suggested she take a turn in the dark supply closet.

Meanwhile, Bas stalked right back up to his flat, tracking red wine footprints behind him.

Now that Taggie had seen him, he was all she could think about. She caught herself making excuses to go out to the bar or work on tasks at the other end of the kitchen that would allow her to look through the windows in the kitchen doors, hoping for a glimpse of him. Even though it felt like a shard of ice stabbing her in the heart, just being able to see him was like a flash of light in her fog of misery. She knew it was pathetic, but she was beyond pride at this point.

A few hours later, the Venturer crew began to filter in for the karaoke night celebration. It was originally intended to celebrate Declan and Cameron heading to Ireland for an on-location shoot of a new drama that Venturer was being invited to co-produce (which was an important networking connection and asset for their application). The gathering had also been converted to a joint, last-minute send-off for Bas. Everyone (including Declan) was surprised by the news that Bas was leaving. It wasn't unusual for him to travel to Argentina, but a

sudden, extended was odd. Whenever someone asked why he was going, he told them that it was due to "unforeseen circumstances that resulted in him being needed in Argentina." No one asked any follow-up questions, all being too posh and avoidant to push for details, in case he was making a trip due to some type of family emergency with his Argentinian father. The reality of his parentage was an unpleasantness no one wanted to directly address, and Bas was grateful for the shield it provided.

The party was in full-swing when Rupert and Cameron arrived. There was no sign of Bas, which Rupert thought was odd. After another hour and still no sign, Rupert excused himself from Cameron and went upstairs to his friend's flat. *The idiot is missing his own farewell party .*

The flat door was wide open, so Rupert walked in and saw Bas, sitting in a robe on his sofa, an open bottle of whiskey in his hand. A polo match was on the television, but Bas wasn't watching it. He was staring straight up at the ceiling, his head resting on the back of the sofa. He was disheveled and looked absolutely miserable. Rupert crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, just inside the room.

"And what the fuck do *you* want?" Bas asked, slowly lifting his head to look at Rupert. Rupert was taken aback by his friend's hostile, clipped tone, his dark narrowed eyes. He had known Bas a long time, but he had never seen him like this.

"You're missing the party downstairs. It's quite a rager," Rupert joked.

Bas just stared at him blandly and took a swig from the bottle. Rupert scoffed and rolled his eyes. Chuckling, he walked across the room and grabbed the bottle, moving to take it from Bas. Bas shocked him by grabbing his forearm in a vice grip and wrenching it off of the bottle. "Don't," he snarled up at Rupert.

Rupert held his hands out in front of him and slowly walked backwards. "What the *fuck* , Bas?" He had never, *ever* seen his friend this tense, this *angry* . *Christ, he looks like he might beat the shit out of me* .

"Just get the fuck out of my flat," Bas spat, his eyes narrowed, gesturing toward the door with the bottle.

On his way back down the stairs to the Bar, Rupert ran into the blonde girl who worked in the kitchen who was on her way up. "I wouldn't bother," Rupert called after her. "He's in *quite* the mood."

Moriah scoffed and rolled her eyes. "The big fucking *baby* ," and continued on up the steps. Rupert laughed. *She was a spunky one.*

Rupert had no idea what she had said or done, but a few minutes later, the blonde girl came down the back stairs, a now-dressed, slightly less-sulky Bas in tow. Rupert couldn't fathom what was wrong with his friend. *Maybe something was wrong with his father* .

Of course this is my fucking job, too , Moriah thought. *I really don't get paid enough.* Bas had disappeared up to his flat that afternoon, immediately after he made a scene shattering an entire bottle of wine. The Venturer contingent was asking about him downstairs, and she was

sick of making excuses for him when she knew he was pouting upstairs. She went into his flat and stood just where Rupert had, much in his same posture, looking at Bas, wallowing in self-pity on the sofa.

"Well aren't you a sight?" She asked.

He glared at her. "You can get the fuck out, too."

Unfazed, she glared right back at him. "You have an entire bar full of people who love you down there, wanting to send you off, and you're up here acting like a big fucking baby. Over a mess *you* made. You're up here, like this," she gestured at his robe-clad person with her hands, "and Taggie is downstairs in the kitchen, back at work, pulling her weight, despite being *crushed* . And you can't even get up off your ass to make a polite showing."

At the mention of Taggie, Moriah watched Bas crumple forward and put his head in his hands. She released a deep, exasperated sigh and went back to his bedroom, grabbing a shirt, pants, socks, and came back out, throwing the lot of them at his head. "I'll give you five minutes."

Rupert watched his friend's spirits rise over the course of the evening. There was still clearly something wrong, but he was closer to the old Bas. He even gave Rupert a curt but friendly nod, which Rupert interpreted as Bas's apology for being a shit earlier.

Eventually, the party wound down, and most of the crew had trickled out of the Bar, leaving only Rupert and Cameron, Freddie and Lizzie, and a few other stragglers. As the last of the group started to move to put on their coats, Rupert happened to glance over, and he saw Bas's face fall and his posture crumple, like he had been punched in the stomach. Puzzled, Rupert followed the line of Bas's gaze and his stomach flipped when he saw Taggie, standing at the end of the bar, a few meters from them. Her face was deathly white, her lips pressed into a thin line. She was holding onto the bar edge behind her with white knuckles, like if she let go she might fall flat on the floor. Rupert looked between the two of them, and he suddenly understood Bas's mood earlier and probably the real reason for his sudden trip to Argentina. *Bas and Taggie are done,* he realized, with a wave of relief and elation that made him feel ashamed of himself.

He watched as they slowly approached each other and seemed to melt together. The grief washing off of both of them was palpable. Taggie's face was pressed into Bas's neck, his mouth pressed to her forehead, his hand in her hair. He noticed that Taggie's shoulders seemed to be shuddering, and Rupert realized she must be sobbing into Bas's neck. His own self-centered feelings momentarily forgotten, he stared at Taggie and Bas. He was at a complete loss, remembering how they had looked the night of the Venturer event—glowing, inseparable. *What the fuck could have made that fall apart in three days?*

Moriah, noticing Taggie had left the kitchen, frowned and walked out just in time to see her and Bas sleepwalk toward each other, like Catherine and Heathcliff reuniting on the moors. *This was going to be messy.* Moriah also noticed Rupert Campbell-Black, the only guest to register what was happening, staring intently at the two of them. Moriah didn't care

for the keen brightness she saw in Rupert's eyes as he watched Taggie crumble in Bas's arms, registering her heartbreak and likely connecting the dots as to the reason for Bas's sudden travels.

Moriah marched right up to Rupert, grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him around, and pushed him toward the door. "Okay, everyone, Bar is closed! Time to get the fuck out!"

Rupert, who didn't actually know Moriah, was caught off guard, but soon recovered himself enough to try to turn around to keep looking. Moriah, having shooed everyone else into the entryway behind Rupert, out of sight of Bas and Taggie, stared daggers at Rupert and crossed her arms over her chest, raising an eyebrow. The rest of the guests filtered out the door, leaving Rupert and Moriah staring at each other in the hallway, the door to outside open behind him. Moriah walked up to him slowly, holding his gaze. "They don't need an audience. Get. Out." she hissed, stabbing her index finger into his chest.

Coming back to himself, he obeyed and walked out, Moriah closing and locking the door behind him. All the way back to Penscombe, Rupert tried and failed to maintain a conversation with Cameron, his mind racing as he processed the scene had just witnessed. Then it hit him, *Bas would be gone for months, Cameron and Declan for a week. It would just be him and Taggie, alone in the valley.* The thought filled him with a wild rush of joy. His mood shifting drastically, he suddenly found it very easy to cheerfully converse with Cameron as they got out of the car at Penscombe and she finished packing.

Cameron hadn't witnessed the scene between Taggie and Bas at the bar, nor had Declan informed her about Taggie moving back into the Priory. Without this information, she was heartened by Rupert's cheery demeanor for the rest of that night. Between his good mood, her excitement for Ireland, and her last-minute packing, she failed to notice Rupert's long looks out the window, across the valley.

Back at the Bar, Taggie and Bas had fused together and were oblivious to everything around them. What finally caught their attention was the dimming of the Bar lights. Moriah stood, arms crossed leaning against the door of the empty bar. She gave the two of them a long look, then looked at Taggie. "I'll leave you to it, then." She slipped out the front door, locking it behind her.

Bas held Taggie back at arm's length, and reached up to take her face in his hands. He used his thumbs to wipe away the tears on her cheeks, his jaw clenched, his brow furrowed, and his own eyes misty. "Stay tonight?" he whispered.

Taggie took a shallow, shaky breath. She nodded, and they walked up to Bas's flat in silence.

Without speaking a word, they undressed each other in Bas's bedroom. Taggie tried to smile up at him, but her smile cracked, and she felt her eyes well up with tears. She pressed her forehead to his chest, and he put his fingers under her chin and lifted her face up to meet his eyes. He tilted his head to the side. "I know," he whispered.

"It doesn't have to be like this," Taggie whispered, pressing her hands to his chest.

Bas gave her a weak half smile, then leaned in and kissed her fervently. She pulled him to her and kissed him back. It felt like goodbye, *was* goodbye, and they were desperate to memorize, consume as much of each other as possible. Bas needed to put his hands in her hair, press his forehead to hers and memorize the blue of her eyes. Taggie needed to have his hands *everywhere* , pressing them to her with her own hands, like she could stamp her body with their imprint if she just tried hard enough. Entangled in the dark, each of them drank in the other as if they were dying of thirst. Taggie only wanted him inside her, on top of her, where she could hold him as closely and as tightly as possible. When she felt him climax, she took his face in her hands, her hands shaking, and pulled his face down, pressing his forehead to hers. When her blue eyes met his brown ones, she lost the battle against the lump in her throat and she started to cry. Her shoulders shaking, she pressed her face into his neck. He wrapped his arms around her, rolled both of them to the side, and held her against him, his face pressed to the top of her head, one hand stroking her hair. That only made her cry harder.

They laid like that for hours—Taggie's head tucked under Bas's chin, their arms and legs around each other, his hand in her hair. This close to him, the scent and sweat of him all over her, Taggie slowly began to feel grounded, steady, for the first time in days. *He can't leave, he won't. This is insane.*

Taggie held him tighter as she saw the beams of the first light of dawn seep through the curtains, as if she could will time to stop. Finally, she felt him lift his head and start to stir. She assumed he had looked at the clock on the wall behind her. *No no no no no no no no no no no.*

He extracted himself from her and in one swift motion rolled out of bed on the other side. She sat up rapidly, her eyes watching him as he darted around the room, gathering clothes and dressing himself, refusing to look at her. She could feel her breath coming quick and shallow, her body starting to tremble. *He's really going to do it.*

Bas had looked up at the clock on his wall and realized his car to the airport would be arriving any minute. He gave Taggie one last squeeze, trying to etch into his own body the memory of how her nose, her breasts, her thighs all felt pressed into the front of him. He felt a deep ache in his chest and for a moment, considered staying there, wrapped up with her. *Then I'll have to sit by and watch it all fall apart, watch her disappear from my arms, my bed, my life.* He would rather die. He *might* die if he had to witness it all unfold. Drawing strength from that thought, he untangled himself from Taggie and rolled out of bed, laser focused on dressing himself. *Soon he would be out the door, and Taggie would be free to pursue what she had always wanted, who she wanted, without him there to interfere. He was doing her a favor, really.* All of his lofty self-justifications still didn't fortify him enough to turn and look at her, say anything to her. He was terrified that he would look at her again and lose all of his resolve, crawl back into that bed with her and never leave. He was facing the closet, buttoning his shirt, when he heard her timid whisper, her voice ready to crack, "Bas?"

He closed his eyes and took a deep, unsteady breath. Without turning around, he finished buttoning his shirt, and chose and donned a jacket. He walked to the door of the bedroom, his hand on the handle. He turned around to look at her then.

She was sitting up, the sheets pooled in her waist, her long hair wild around her face, cascading around her thin shoulders. He wanted to memorize every line, every angle of her. Everything except for the look on her face—he would remember that for the rest of his life. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying and lack of sleep. And written on her face—despair, like her world had ended, that she couldn't believe he would *actually* do this. Like he had ripped her heart out and was grinding it to dust in front of her. He forced himself to conjure the image of her and Rupert in the Priory kitchen, under that tent at the polo match. *It's better this way. For everyone.*

He forced a small smile, fighting the lump in his throat, all his self-control channeled into keeping his voice steady. "Bye, Tag," he said softly.

He turned and left the room, closing the door after him.

Taggie listened to him open and close the flat door, listened to his footsteps going down the street-side steps, heard the sound of the exterior door shut, heard the sound of a car door closing. She sat like that, frozen, for over an hour, hoping, praying that he would come back. Beg the cab to turn around, realize the mistake he was making. An hour passed, and there were no footsteps on the stairs, the phone never rang. *He's really gone.* She slowly laid down and pulled the blankets over her head, gasping for air as her hands began to shake.

Taggie had no idea how many hours had passed since Bas had left for the airport. She was curled in the fetal position, still naked, in the middle of the bed, fully concealed under the blankets. She had sobbed until her ribcage ached and her throat burned. Her eyes stung, her face was hot. She wanted to die. She felt like she was halfway there already.

She heard footsteps, then felt someone sit down on the edge of the bed.

It was Moriah. "Taggie, we'll be closed in about an hour. I'm going to come back upstairs then and take you home. You *can't* stay here. Can you be ready in an hour?"

Taggie tried to reply, to say yes, she could. But when she opened her mouth to speak, she just started to cry again. Slowly, Moriah pulled the blanket down to expose her face. The cool, fresh air felt good, even if the shame of being seen like that did not. Moriah softly stroked her hair, as if she was a little girl. "Would you like me to help you after I close?"

Taggie nodded, pressing her face into the mattress. "Okay," Moriah whispered. She pulled the blankets back up over Taggie's head and left her there.

Ralphie had been an idiot. Rupert had never been hers to lose, not really. It was all stolen glances, a kiss, longing from a distance. It had been like grieving a ghost, the promise of something that *could be* . But Bas, he had been *real.* He had been *hers* . She had had all of him. She knew what every inch of his body looked like, how it felt under her hands. Whatever she had felt, did feel for Rupert, the pain she felt when he chose Cameron after that kiss in the kitchen was *nothing* compared to this. That had been an ache in her chest, crying in her bed feeling broken. She could retreat to the kitchen to cope. *This* felt like dying over and over again. Now, food, the kitchen, just the thought of it was *hell* . All of it reminded her of him. She wanted to stay in his flat, wrapped in his sheets that smelled like him, pretending he

could walk back in at any moment. It felt like she was being ripped in half, and pretending like it wasn't real was the only thing keeping her intact.

As promised, Moriah came up after closing, and helped Taggie get dressed as she continued to sob, which at this point was mostly her body shaking, as her eyes refused to make any more tears. Before they left the flat, Taggie, on an impulse, went to Bas's closet and pulled out his gold polo jersey, his pastel pink suit jacket, and a stack of the jumpers he wore often. He might have left her, and she might be leaving his flat, but she was determined to take a piece of him, or as close as she could get, with her. Moriah watched her silently, her lips pressed into a thin line. She was concerned, but supposed it was a positive development that Taggie had the initiative to raid his closet.

Moriah drove Taggie back to the Priory that night, her arms full of Bas's clothes. Moriah remembered Taggie's smug father, and decided to walk her upstairs to her room, not trusting him to care for his eldest daughter. She watched with pity as Taggie changed into a nightgown and then pulled Bas's gold polo jersey over it and crawled into bed. Moriah told Taggie to let her know when she was ready to come back to the Bar—she could take a month off if she needed it. She wasn't sure that Taggie heard her, but she didn't stay to repeat herself. She left her alone with her grief.

Taggie had done the math in her head, and she figured that by the time Moriah collected her from Bas's flat then took her to the Priory, he would have landed in Argentina. She was so convinced he would call and was so afraid of accidentally missing that call that she slept on the sofa next to the phone, coming downstairs wrapped in a blanket not long after Moriah left. *If he really loves me, if he feels like this , he will call. He has to* . That first night, she slept fitfully, exhausted from both the emotions of the previous days as well as the lack of sleep the night before. However, as soon as she felt herself drifting off, she would spontaneously remember the sound of his laugh, the way his brown eyes would sparkle when he knew he was being ridiculous, and the tears started all over again. She felt like a cracked piece of glass, ready to shatter at the slightest touch. Eventually she gave up trying to sleep, tossing and turning on the sofa in his polo jersey. There was no call. *And it's my fault.*

That second day, she spent the entire day in the kitchen, nervously organizing and reorganizing the pantry, jumping at the slightest sound, desperate for the phone to ring. *He's only 3 hours behind us. He could call anytime.* She checked the phone three times to make sure all the wires were connected properly. There was no call.

That second night, she laid awake the entire night, staring up at the ceiling, frozen like a corpse. This time, she wore his dark green jumper over her nightgown. *I ruined the best thing that ever happened to me.* A wave of anger and disgust washed over her, directed at both herself and Rupert. There was no call.

When dawn broke through the Priory windows after that second sleepless night, Taggie swung her legs off the sofa and planted her bare feet on the floor, pressing them firmly against the cold wooden boards. The chill brought her back into her body. She ran her hands through her hair and sighed deeply. She had no tears, no grief, no hope left. She felt hollow, like she would never feel anything again. *No matter what he said he felt, he's not coming back. He's not calling. It's really over.*

Taggie called Moriah and told her she would be coming in that day. *She needed to get the fuck out of this house.*

9. Is it Over Now?

That morning, instead of going back to the Bar kitchen, after consulting with Moriah, Taggie called someone on their catering waitlist. This person had asked weeks ago to have them cater a luncheon that day, and Taggie called them this morning, offering that she could come, just herself, and prepare everything in their home. They jumped at the opportunity. The only challenge was that Moriah needed a vehicle for a different, mid-morning catering gig and hers was in the shop. Taggie volunteered to take the train, as her destination was just off of the next station anyway, and let Moriah borrow the O'Hara vehicle. Moriah would finish before Taggie and Moriah told Taggie to just call the Bar when she got to the Cotchester station, and she would come to collect her. But when Taggie got off the train that afternoon, she called the Bar and Moriah's flat, both with no answer. She sighed. She only had two medium-sized bags with her, and she could walk back to the Bar—it would just be annoying and take 20-30 minutes. While it had rained all that morning, it had finally stopped, so at least she wouldn't get drenched on the walk back.

Taggie started down the sidewalk, and a car sped past her, its tires passing squarely through the middle of a puddle along the curb, created by the earlier heavy rain. The spray of water created by the volume of the puddle and the speed of the car was sufficient to completely soak Taggie from head to toe. Shocked by the cold water suddenly streaming down her face and soaking through all of her clothes, Taggie froze in place and dropped both of the bags she was carrying onto the sidewalk, her arms held out from her sides. *This day can't get any worse.* She watched the car that had sprayed her screech to a halt and the driver's side door fly open. She rolled her eyes and picked up her bags and started to walk. She froze again when she saw *Rupert* get out of the car and start jogging toward her. *I guess it can* . For a second, she considered dropping the bags and sprinting in the opposite direction. He was the last person she wanted to see. She was still raw from Bas's departure, and the sight of Rupert made her incredibly angry. If Rupert wasn't always *him* , always *there* , especially at that fucking polo match, Bas would still be here. She would still be happy.

"Taggie!? Taggie? God, I'm *so* sorry!"

He sounded utterly disconcerted, seeing that he had completely drenched her. Taggie laughed bitterly and started walking past him, refusing to look at him. "It's fine."

He grabbed the handle on one of her bags, the edge of his pinky finger grazing hers. Taggie immediately dropped the bag, as if the touch of his finger was poisonous. The abruptness of it surprised Rupert and the unexpected weight of the full bag almost jerked his shoulder out of its socket. "Where are you going? Let me give you a lift. It's the least I can do, considering," he said, gesturing to her dripping form with a smile, trying to make light of the situation.

His smile died on his lips when Taggie turned to him, her face as serious as death, her eyes flat. "I am perfectly capable of walking, thank you."

Taggie then started to walk away, leaving him holding one of her bags. *Christ, she's serious* . He walked after her and grabbed the handle on the second bag to stop her. "Tag, let

me give you a ride. This is my fault, let me at least do this." His hand again touched hers on the bag handle, and this time, she didn't jerk away.

She sighed deeply and her shoulders slumped, defeated. "Okay, you can drive me to the Bar." Taggie let him take her bags and she silently slid into the passenger seat and looked out the window, refusing to look at him or make any attempt at conversation.

Rupert was concerned. In the days since Cameron, Bas, and Declan had all left, Rupert had struggled to keep himself away from the Priory. He had reasoned with himself in his head that Taggie would need a couple of days after Bas's departure to lick her wounds, and then she would be ready, perhaps even eager, to see him. He had seen how she and Bas looked together, but in his mind, he couldn't really imagine that they were really *in love* . Besides, Bas had left for some reason, and he assumed it meant they had some quarrel. *She might be brokenhearted, but I can be there, help her, like the old days.* So the depth of Taggie's dark mood took him by surprise. It also concerned him that his ability to slip into Bas's place may be more difficult than he had originally anticipated. *You fucking idiot, she's the most sincere, good person you've ever met. Of course she has deep, wholesome, real feelings that wouldn't evaporate in 48 hours.*

Rupert had the car radio on, and in the tense silence, Lady in Red began to play. Taggie lunged forward and slammed the heel of her hand against the radio dial, turning it off with a violence that startled Rupert. "I fucking *hate* that song," Taggie whispered, leaning back in her seat to again look out the passenger window. Rupert felt a cold hand close around his heart. *Fuck.*

As they waited at a red light, Rupert looked over at her, crammed into the corner of the passenger seat. This dejected, cynical person was not the Taggie he knew. "Are you okay, angel?" She visibly cringed at the last word. The heavy silence hung between them as the light changed and Rupert continued forward.

Suddenly feeling awkward, an unusual state for him, Rupert tried to make conversation, regretting the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. "I saw you and Bas at the Bar the night before he left. I'm sorry if something has gone off between the two of you."

Taggie looked over at him, her eyes full of disdain. Not noticing her glare, he continued, "Did Bas do something? He can be a real scoundrel. I should know," Rupert quipped, trying to joke to lighten the mood.

"Don't talk about him like that," Taggie whispered sharply, turning to again look out the window, her forehead pressed against the cold glass.

From Taggie, that quiet comment was the equivalent of a slap in the face, and Rupert felt appropriately censured. Again, they stopped at a red light. He looked over at her, taking in her clenched posture. He realized with horror that she was silently crying, tears running down her cheeks. "Tag, I'm sorry, I know it's none of my business." *Why the fuck did I have to say that?*

She turned and looked at him then, fat tears running down her face, her eyes bloodshot. "He left because he didn't believe I could love him, because he thought I could only love someone else." Her gaze held Rupert's. "And he was wrong," she whispered, as the car behind Rupert laid on their horn. *Fuck, how long had the light been green?*

As he coasted through the intersection, he fixated on her words, "…he thought I could only love someone else." His heart was racing. Was this Taggie saying she loved *him?* He felt warm tendrils of hope spread through his body. As he spotted the Bar Sinister ahead, another realization hit him as he processed the rest of what she had said. Bas left because of *him* . Rupert clenched his jaw and turned to look at Taggie and started, realizing she was staring him down, her blue eyes icy.

"You grabbing me at that polo match ruined *everything* ," she whispered, grief and disgust in her tone. Rupert's stomach dropped. She was devastated, and she blamed him.

Rupert pulled into a parking space in front of the Bar, and Taggie turned and reached for the door handle. Desperate to keep her near him, to somehow try to make some kind of amends, but also knowing that anything he suggested would be inadequate, Rupert blurted out the first thing that popped into his mind, "My daughter is a junior showjumper, and she has a trial tomorrow. Would you like to come with me to watch? Get your mind off of things?"

Taggie gave him a long look. "I'm catering a dinner at the Joneses tomorrow. I won't be available, I'm afraid. I hope you both have a nice night." She got out of the car, slammed the door, grabbed her bags from the backseat, and disappeared into the Bar without another word. Rupert looked over at the wet imprint on the passenger seat where her wet body had sat. *What the fuck is wrong with me? Why did I say any of that??* His elation at knowing that the two of them wouldn't have external meddlers for this week evaporated as he finally put it together that not only had his behavior imploded whatever Bas and Taggie had, but she fucking hated him for it. If she *had* loved him once, he had clearly done everything within his power to wipe those feelings out of existence. Rupert leaned forward, tapping his head against the steering wheel in frustration. *Fucking idiot.*

After taking one look at her soggy clothes and sour expression, Moriah had laughed and told Taggie to just take her vehicle, go home, get dry, and start prepping for the dinner party she was catering the next day.

Back at the Priory, with an unexpected few hours to herself, Taggie changed, instinctively reaching for Bas's dark green jumper. It was a lovely crisp fall day outside, and she decided she fancied a fire. *And maybe a drink* . She filled her arms with firewood from outside the front door and grabbed a full bottle of Jameson from her father's liquor cabinet. She built herself a small fire in the backyard and warmed her hands by it, taking sips directly from the bottle of whiskey. Again alone with her thoughts in the silent, clear light of day, she revisited for the millionth time that conversation with Bas in his flat the night after the polo match. In the moment and in the days immediately after, she had been filled with guilt and shame. She felt like she had ruined everything and chased Bas away. But now, taking hearty swigs of whiskey, Taggie started to get angry.

He wouldn't even let me finish a fucking sentence . He made up his mind before he ever talked to me. He never asked me how I felt, what I wanted. He just assumed he knew what I was thinking, what was best for me. And then he fucking ran away without even letting me say my piece. What a fucking cowardly piece of fucking shit .

Animated by her anger and emboldened by the whiskey, she decided the fire needed to be *much* larger. She made multiple trips back and forth to the front of the house, her arms full of firewood, and stoked the fire until it was absolutely massive. The heat, size, and blazing red-orange color of it pleased her. It matched how she felt inside.

As she kept working her way through the bottle, she replayed that night over and over again—all the times Bas had cut her off, all the things she wanted to say and that he wouldn't let her. And then she slowly, gently allowed herself to return to the morning he had left. How he hadn't turned back to look at her as he dressed, even when she called out to him. Just tossed her a "Bye, Tag" and walked out of her life. *Fucking coward* . Her blood felt like molten lava in her veins as she stood up and staggered back inside the house, heading up to her room with a determined, if unsteady, stride.

Some minutes later, across the valley, Rupert looked out the parlor window at Penscombe and saw smoke rising from the Priory. Concerned, he sped over in his car and immediately could see that the smoke was coming from behind the house. Suddenly, he heard someone scream, "FUCK!" at the top of their lungs. *It was Taggie.* His heart stopped and he sprinted through the front door and out to the back.

There was indeed a fire on the back lawn, a quite large one. Taggie sat beside it, a mostly empty bottle of whiskey on one side of her, a stack of miscellaneous items on the other. She was wearing an oversized dark green jumper—he recognized it as the one she had been wearing at Bas's the morning after the Hunt Ball, the one she had worn the day after her birthday, his head in her lap, at the Priory. *As if I could ever forget that fucking jumper.* As he approached, he could see that she was leaning forward, slowly rocking back and forth, her knees pulled to her chest, sobbing.

He knew his presence would be unwelcome after their tense car ride earlier that day, and he thought about silently retreating and leaving her to it. But he looked again at the drained whiskey bottle, the way she swayed when she reached over to the pile beside her, and how close the fire was to the house. He decided to stay. If she chased him away, he would retreat inside the house and keep an eye on her from inside to make sure she didn't fall into the fire or burn down the Priory.

He cleared his throat, and she jumped, then unsteadily swung around to face him. *She is very drunk* . Upon seeing it was him she rolled her eyes and pounded both of her fists into the ground. "Oh, FUCK me!" she yelled in disgust.

He sat beside her on the damp, cold grass.

"Burning the fields?" he joked.

"Something like that," she whispered, her eyes fixed on the fire in front of her. She grabbed what looked like a gold polo jersey from the pile beside her and threw it onto the fire. Rupert looked over at the pile. He noticed now that it was all well-made men's clothing. He was willing to bet that they were all Bas's things. The symbolism of it gave him hope. *Maybe there is a chance.*

“And what the fuck do *you* want? Can’t a woman have a fire on her own property in peace?” Taggie asked, refusing to look at him.

“I just want to make sure you don’t burn down the family estate,” he jested.

Taggie hugged her knees tighter to her chest and rested her cheek on her knees, squinting over at him. “And would that *really* be any great loss?” she hissed.

Rupert had to laugh. *Taggie was piss-drunk, all right.*

Taggie blindly grabbed at the pile next to her and grabbed a heather grey jumper, the last remaining garment, and launched it onto the fire.

“What are we burning this evening?”

Taggie scoffed. “Evidence.”

“Evidence?”

“Evidence of how stupid I am,” she slurred.

Rupert looked over at her, moved by her grief and bitterness. He thought back to that night at the Bar, watching her collapse into Bas, her silent tears that morning in his car. *She really was devastated.* He was ashamed now of how he had thought about rushing in and rescuing her from her grief this week, thinking she would be eager for him to be some kind of knight in shining armor. *Deluded, wishful thinking.* “Angel, you are *not* stupid.”

She looked over at him unsteadily, reaching for another jumper. “You’re right. *I’m* not. *You* are .” She started to laugh derisively.

Despite her drunken state, her words still stung. “Okay.” He forced a chuckle, confused.

The two of them stared into the fire for a few minutes in silence. Rupert looked over at Taggie, but she seemed lost in thought, staring at the fire, a range of emotions playing over her face.

Seeing her like this sincerely distressed him. He had no idea what to do, but he wanted to help, do something, *anything* to take that look off of her face, lift that burden from her shoulders. Making her life easier was all he had ever wanted to do, really. “Tag, what’s wrong? Can I help?”

She scowled at him.

“What the fuck is wrong with *both* of you?? I’m so sick of *old men* who act like *babies* . No one asks me, thinks about me, what I want, what I need. You fucking chased Cameron to help your business deal even though you can’t stand her, and you know she loves you. You kissed me and left me, when you knew I loved you. Bas loves me but ran the fuck away because he was scared. You’re both the absolute *worst* .”

They again sat in silence, looking into the fire. Whatever Rupert had expected her to say, it wasn’t that. He knew he had been a shit for the past few months, but having Taggie put it in such clear terms again filled him with shame. It seemed she was always disappointed in him. *Probably because I keep giving her reasons to be.*

Taggie released a heavy sigh and flung herself onto her back on the grass, looking up at the clear blue sky. Rupert could see her mind working, her eyes scanning back and forth over the cloudless sky, a range of emotions playing out across her face.

Suddenly, she screamed "FUCK!", and sat bolt-upright, frantically pulling at the dark green jumper she wore, pulling it over her head and throwing it onto the fire, leaving her clad in only her bra and jeans, not phased by the November chill. As she watched the flames lick up over and consume the green jumper, she started to sob despondently, rocking back and forth, her face again pressed to her knees. Having to witness her agony made Rupert feel like someone was carving out part of his own chest. But he was at a complete loss as to what to do. He knew he couldn't put his arm around her—she was too angry, too feral for that. He also had no idea what to say—around her, especially recently, words completely failed him. He decided to just take his coat off and drape it over her shoulders. Even that gesture seemed to rankle her. Taggie ripped it off and threw it back at him. "I don't need your fucking *charity*," she spat, slurring her words. Then she collapsed into tears again. He covertly dropped the coat over her shoulders again. She expelled another heavy sigh and threw herself backwards onto the ground again, now lying on top of his coat, it now helping to keep neither of them warm. With his lips pressed into a thin line, he got up and went inside the house and retrieved a stack of blankets, one of which he draped over Taggie's half-clothed body and one that he wrapped around himself.

"FUUUUUCK!" Taggie screamed at the top of her lungs, looking up at the sky. Startled, Rupert almost jumped out of his skin.

"Does it ever stop?" She asked, looking over at him, her chest heaving, her eyes bright and wet.

"Does what stop?"

"Feeling like a giant has reached into your chest and is crushing you from the inside."

Rupert didn't reply for a moment, looking intently at the fire. *No, it doesn't* . "It does."

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't lie to me."

Still looking at the fire, a bitter half-smile formed on his lips. "No, it doesn't. But you learn to live with it."

She sighed heavily and rolled over, her face now pressed into the grass, groaning. "I could have told you that." She lifted her face from the grass to look at him flatly. "Isn't old age supposed to make you wiser?" Rupert laughed in spite of himself, and he was heartened to see Taggie muster a sincere, half-smile before she dropped her face back to the ground.

He thought then how little he actually *knew* her. All of his stupid gestures—his fixation on keeping Bas away from her during and after the Hunt Ball, buying her a fucking puppy for her birthday, even his desire to spirit her off to Penscombe where she never had to cook for anyone again—they were rooted in some fantasy of her as some helpless, very attractive, juvenile Cinderella in need of a Prince Charming with a fortune and a big house. He had seen her as some type of broken bird in need of rescue because of how soft and gentle she was, thinking she was unable to weather the harsh realities of the world without his protection. But he had been wrong. Even in the midst of her current heartbreak, she was bearing up better than he ever had in the wake of the Hunt Ball. He had always respected her, but in that

moment, his perception of her shifted, expanded. *She was strong* . It only made him love her more.

“Do you want to talk about it? About… Bas?” Rupert asked softly, his eyes fixed on a piece of grass he was ripping into small pieces.

Still lying on her stomach, her face in the grass, she groaned again. “I don’t think I’ll ever want to talk about him with you.” Then, she looked over at him, her blue eyes suddenly very lucid and intense. She pulled herself up into a sitting position, the blanket falling away, drawing his eye to the black bra that clung to her small, firm breasts, her navel visible just above the waist of her jeans. Her cheeks were red from the fire and the whiskey, a clear contrast to the rest of her, which was milky white. Taggie scooted closer to him, looking up into his face, her eyes bright. He found himself disturbed by her proximity, her half-clothed state.

“Rupert?” she whispered, looking up at him intently, her eyes wide, leaning toward him.

“Yes, Tag?” he asked, breathless, leaning in.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

He barely scrambled out of the way before she retched, vomiting up most of the whiskey she had consumed, exactly where he had been sitting. He knelt beside her to hold her hair while she emptied her stomach. Finally spent, on her hands and knees, she moaned miserably and started to sway to the side, ready to collapse back into the grass. Laughing ruefully, Rupert put an arm around her to steady her and helped her inside and up to her room, leaving her flat on her back on her bed, still topless. He draped a blanket over her and left her to herself. He returned to the backyard and put out the fire before he left, turning over her words in his mind as he did. *She had said that she loved me.* While he knew *he* loved *her* , that declaration from her thrilled him. He recalled her comment from earlier in the day where she had said that Bas was wrong when he thought she could only love “someone else.” *She may have loved Bas, but Bas was gone, and I’m here . Taggie is clearly broken, but I can put her back together.*

Rupert drove back to Penscombe, thinking of Taggie’s smile, her laugh, how *good* and kind she was. If someone like that, an angel, could see something in him of value, worth loving, then maybe he wasn’t such a shit after all. He had always acted as bad as everyone had assumed him to be, and it had always given him a morbid sense of satisfaction to exceed expectations in that realm. However, the idea that someone as open, genuine, and grounded as Taggie could *love him* made him feel alive in a way that he had never felt before. He thought with fond amusement about when he had brought back that fucking Faberge egg from Spain for her. Anyone else would have immediately recognized it for what it was—a grand gesture by a rich man. Taggie, though, just thought it was a beautiful trinket. He could have brought her a smooth rock from the beach and she would have reacted the same way. She hadn’t wanted him, loved him for all the trappings, she wanted him for *him* . The idea of it was alien to Rupert as he had always been the heir to the estate, the Olympic sex symbol. He had trouble wrapping his head around it—the idea that Taggie saw him, the man, and in her sincerity, *loved him* . The thought moved him. Gripping the steering wheel tighter, Rupert resolved to make himself worthy of her. If it killed him, he would work to be the man she thought he could be.

As the remnants of his clothes smoldered behind the Priory, Bas was in Argentina and abjectly miserable.

Since he arrived, he had been getting absolutely piss-drunk at a different bar every night, to the point where he was too hungover during the days to do anything useful with the horses. He had blamed it on jetlag, but with a three hour time difference, everyone knew better. On this particular night, at yet another new venue, he noticed a beautiful brunette giving him the eye, down along the bar to his right. He waved the bartender over and ordered her another of whatever she was drinking. *No harm in a little distraction* .

As the bartender walked over with the drink, Bas turned to catch her eye. As he did, he noticed a flash of long, thick auburn hair just on the other side of the brunette. His heart stopped. His mind conjured an image of Taggie at his flat kitchen counter, him approaching her from behind, putting his arms around her waist, burying his face in her hair. *That fucking hair. I've been gone for three days. Cameron and Declan are gone. I bet Rupert is already at the Priory, staking his claim.* Bas imagined Rupert and Taggie in an embrace, Rupert's hands in her hair. Bas drained his drink.

He immediately stood up from his stool and started to walk purposefully toward the brunette. Her face lit up with excitement, then she frowned, confused, as Bas continued past her, completely ignoring her, and took a seat, three barstools to her right, planting himself beside the redhead, who was both surprised and pleased to be the subject of his full charm offensive. Some time later, the two of them were both in the redhead's bed, naked, Bas on top of her, his hands in her hair. As they fucked, she kept trying to pull Bas's face to her to kiss him, but he kept jerking his head out of her hands, facing the wall, the headboard. She was confused at first, then realized that he didn't want to look at her. That pissed her off, and she pushed him off of her, grabbing his clothes and chasing him out of her apartment, leaving him naked on her front step, as she threw his clothes out the front door after him. He dressed himself and walked unsteadily back to the bar, weaving back and forth across the sidewalk. He wasn't *nearly* drunk enough. And maybe that brunette was still there.

The brunette *was* there, but was unwilling to play after being so recently scorned. Bas continued to drink until he was thoroughly, stupidly, piss-his-pants drunk. He stumbled out of the bar, quite pleased with himself, as in his stupor, he had succeeded in making Taggie's face in his mind blurry. He could almost pretend like he had imagined the last few months.

As he went to stumble his way down the street, back home, he noticed a cart outside the bar selling choripan. He was starving and made a beeline for the cart. After a few minutes of him slurring his way through his order and trying and failing to pull apart the bills in his wallet to pay, the vendor rolled his eyes and as an act of charity just gave Bas the sausage roll for free. "Cheers!" Bas slurred, holding up the roll at eye level as a salute, before staggering off down the sidewalk. He took a bite, ravenous for the meat and bread to soak up some of the alcohol in his gut. When the flavors hit his tongue—pork, beef, pepper, garlic, a hint of red wine, his first impulse was to moan and roll his eyes back in his head. *So fucking good* . His second impulse was to immediately begin to gag and vomit all over the sidewalk in front of him, decidedly *not* missing his shoes. Taggie's face might be blurred in his mind, but the taste of that fucking chorizo she had made for his birthday, those flavors, were hard-wired into his memory. Bas spat, leaning against a tree for support. Frustrated, he threw the rest of his

choripan roll down the street as hard as he could, screaming “FUCK!” as he did, barely missing a young couple at the end of the block. The dam had broken now, and his mind’s eye was no longer cloudy—the images came back to him in a rush, crystal clear. The two of them in the kitchen in his flat, the table covered with chorizo, chimichurri, empanadas, all carefully crafted just for him. The way she had grinned over at him, as they did dishes side-by-side afterwards, their elbows touching. He vomited again.

He hadn’t cried the entire time—not that night when he told her he loved her and was leaving anyway. Not the night before he left when she cried in his arms in his bed. Not on the way to the airport. But he cried now, dejected sobs that shook his whole body, hugging the tree, the rough bark digging into the skin of his forehead.

Less than two meters away, the choripan vendor took all of this in and shook his head, cursing under his breath, and immediately began packing up his cart for the night.

The next morning, Taggie woke up with a raging headache, her mouth dry and tasting absolutely horrid. She looked down at herself and realized that she was half naked and lying on top of her blankets. Holding her pounding head in her hands, she tried to remember the night before. It came back to her in blurry, isolated fragments—a giant fire, throwing up beside it, *Rupert holding her hair* . She groaned with embarrassment. Then her eyes went wide and she gasped. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck.* She scrambled to her closet and threw open the door, looking in the corner where she had kept Bas’s clothes she raided from his flat. *Empty* .

Still topless, she stumbled down the stairs and out to the backyard, almost falling headlong into the giant ash circle. She grabbed a stick and began to frantically poke through the blackened mess. Then she saw it. All that was left was a narrow sliver of one of the cuffs. She gingerly picked up the charred strip of dark green fabric from the ashes. As she held the only remaining piece of Bas’s dark green jumper in her hands, she put a hand over her mouth and began to cry. *Agatha, you drunk fucking idiot* . With that corner of the closet empty and his jumper that had been there for *everything* burned to ash, she felt like she was losing her grip on her memories of him. Like they would slide out of her mind and blow away like the ash she stood in. With trembling hands, she tucked the strip of green fabric into the pocket of her jeans . She imagined Bas in Argentina, surrounded by beautiful, glamorous women, galloping across a polo pitch, drowning in good red wine and chorizo. *Maybe it was for the best that I burned everything. I should try to move on. Bas clearly has* . The thought gave her little comfort as she stared hollowly at the giant black circle in the grass.

Taggie pulled herself together and managed her hangover well enough to get to the Joneses on time. Valerie had requested Beef Bourguignon, a dish Taggie had made a hundred times before. However, in her hungover stupor and her grief over having drunkenly burned not only all of Bas’s clothes, but *especially* that green jumper, she grabbed the wrong container of white crystals. Instead of heavily seasoning the small cuts of beef and the sauce with salt, she had used *sugar.* Taggie didn’t notice it until she tasted the sauce with less than an hour to go before the meal was meant to be served. She lifted the spoon to her lips and immediately screwed up her face and gagged, realizing what she had done. *Fuck me, there’s absolutely no way I can salvage this or have time to make something else.* She knew Valerie would be livid,

as she had invited a whole gaggle of posh people. Between her hangover and general malaise, Taggie was tempted to take off her apron and just walk out of the kitchen. *What the fuck am I going to do?*

Then the phone rang next to her, and she decided to answer it. Maybe it was Moriah, and she would come take her out of this fresh hell.

It was Rupert.

"Tag! I wasn't expecting *you* to answer. How's dinner? A triumph as usual?"

Taggie was horrified to find herself tearing up, ready to cry again for the millionth time in the last week. She pressed her hand to her mouth and didn't reply.

"Taggie? Is something wrong?"

She tried to answer, but when she opened her mouth, she *actually* started to cry.

"Tag, tell me what's wrong." Rupert's tone on the other end of the phone was clipped, urgent, authoritative. Taggie recognized it as the same tone he used that night at the Priory when Cameron had walked in hysterical after her fight with Tony. *He's giving me his crisis treatment.*

Taggie gave a strained, small chuckle. "I've completely cocked up dinner. I've put sugar in the sauce instead of salt. Now the entire thing is inedible, and Valerie is going to skin me alive."

Rupert's tone was still laser-focused, intense. "What was the dish?"

"Beef Bourguignon."

"I'll be there in half an hour." He hung up the phone.

What the fuck is he going to do, perform a miracle of Christ and turn sugar into salt?

Taggie frantically tried adding a range of different seasonings to the sauce, trying to counterbalance the sugar, but nothing worked. If anything, it made it more foul. She knew she should tell Valerie, come up with some alternative, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Her despairing internal monologue was interrupted by a loud knocking at the front door downstairs. *Must be Rupert H. Christ here to perform his miracle,* she thought, rolling her eyes.

When she swung open the front door, she had to eat her words. He *had* performed a miracle. He stood in front of her, immaculately dressed in tailored evening wear, two massive foil trays stacked in his arms. She looked up at him, confused. He gave her a pleased smile. "Beef Bourguignon for 20, from the French spot down the road."

She looked down at the trays, then up at him, shocked. "Thank you. I—what do I owe you?"

He raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Nothing. Consider it *my* payment for coating you in gutter slop yesterday."

Taggie looked up at him, her eyes bright, and flashed him a sincere smile that made his chest contract as she took the trays. "Thank you, Rupert. You really rescued the evening."

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame, smiling down at her with his signature smirk, his dark eyes warm as they took in her smile. For a moment, it felt like their old, tense rapport, before that kiss in the kitchen at the Priory, before everything had fallen apart. It sent a pleasant chill up her spine.

"Don't mention it. And also, don't mention it to Valerie. She doesn't need to know."

Still holding Rupert's gaze, she whispered, "I ought to get back upstairs."

"Right, right." He turned to leave, then paused on the step, turning around. "Tag, would you want to come over to Penscombe on Wednesday? It's a school holiday and I have the children. I was thinking we might have a little neighborly outing." He seemed hesitant, almost shy as he asked it. Taggie was reminded that under all of his pomp and acerbic manner, there *was* a softness to him. His request to spend the afternoon with him and his children provided her with another glimpse of it, and a small crack formed in her resentment. She took in his expectant brown eyes, the slight forward-lean and tense angle of his shoulders, and she felt herself soften toward him.

"Okay," she said, smiling at him over the steaming trays.

"Okay," he repeated, his posture visibly relaxing, a grin spreading across his face. "I'll come get you at the Priory at 10?"

"No, I'll walk down. It's supposed to be a nice day, and I'd like the walk. What can I make? What do they like?"

He laughed, amused, and slapped his hand on the doorframe. "No, Angel, absolutely no cooking for you on Wednesday. This is meant to be fun."

Taggie knew he meant well with that comment, and her smile stayed in place, but she bristled a bit. *He talks about cooking like it's some degrading chore that I should be pleased to be free of, rather than it being what I do . It's like expecting him to be thrilled about not being allowed to do equestrian sports.* She made a mental note to make something anyway.

They stood there for a moment, smiling at each other, both enjoying the fleeting feeling like they had traveled six months back in time. It was Taggie who finally broke the silence. "I really do need to get this upstairs."

"Right, right. Well, see you Wednesday." He flashed her a smile over his shoulder as he returned to his car and sped off.

What in God's name did I just agree to? she thought, standing there in the foyer, holding her miracle Beef Bourguignon for 20.

On Wednesday, Taggie walked across the valley, the sun shining, and approached the front door of Penscombe, a container of fudge in her hand. She paused at the front door, raising her fist to knock. But before her knuckles could come into contact with the door, it flew open, and two small children stood before her. One was a girl who was the spitting image of Rupert—dark hair, dark eyes, saucy, and taking Taggie's measure. Taggie couldn't help but laugh. Beside her stood a smaller, younger boy with auburn hair. He was shy, hiding slightly behind his sister and gave Taggie a small, half smile. Any apprehension she had felt about coming to

Penscombe evaporated. She had always loved children and naturally got on with them. She supposed it probably had something to do with the fact that she had raised Caitlin more as a daughter than a younger sister. Maybe today she could have a nice time and not have to think about any of the last ten days.

Meanwhile, Rupert was about five paces behind the two children, in the hallway, standing with his arms crossed over his chest, wearing a very pleased smile, watching the scene unfold. Taggie looked up over Tabitha's head and caught his eye, a warm and pleasant feeling pooling in her stomach as she did. She found she had forgiven Rupert just a little bit more each day since he had showed up at the Joneses with the Beef Bourguignon. She told herself it had nothing to do with how his shirt stretched across his shoulders or how his dark eyes seemed to stare into her soul. His gaze had often made her feel exposed and today she felt particularly vulnerable. When she announced that she had brought them a fudge, Tabitha responded by holding out her hand for a serving, whereas Marcus turned shyly back to his father and asked if it would be okay to have some or if it would ruin his lunch. Taggie and Rupert shared a sincere laugh at the contrast the two children made. Taggie was enchanted by both of them. They made for a lovely distraction from the burned strip of jumper in her jeans pocket.

After lunch, the four of them went outside so the children could burn off some energy. Rupert sat with his back against a tree and Taggie played with the children, chasing them around on the browning grass. It felt very light-hearted and easy, and Taggie was grateful for it. Out of breath, Taggie sank down onto the grass to rest for a moment, and Tabitha came up to her, grinning, pointing at Rupert. "Daddy's asleep," she whispered smugly.

Taggie held her finger in front of her lips. "Should we get him a present?" she whispered.

Both Tabitha and Marcus nodded, wide smiles on their faces. Taggie whispered in both of their ears and then they set about collecting leaves.

Rupert, however, was not asleep and had been watching the three of them closely. Seeing Taggie with his children, so warm, open, natural, only endeared her to him more. He watched both of his children chase her around with sincere joy and trust. The children had spent the weekend with him and Cameron just before she left for Ireland, and it had been an unmitigated disaster. But this day with Taggie, it felt like a sign from the universe. *As if I needed more of those* . He had been taking pictures of the children all afternoon, and he snapped another set as the three of them ran about picking up leaves. He felt like he was melting in the most pleasant way possible.

When they went back inside, all of them sat on the parlor floor by the fire, each petting at least one dog. Taggie looked up at the ceiling, around at the paintings on the wall, the books, the *size* of the place. *What would it be like to live in a place like this?* She looked across the room at Tabitha and Marcus, each aggressively scratching the back of a dog. A content half-smile crept across her face as she watched them. She really could see Rupert in both of them, both in how they looked and how they behaved—both his pricklier and his softer parts. It was quite precious, really. As she watched them, she started to imagine two different children in their place—perhaps their hair a bit redder, or their eyes a bit bluer—or both with dark hair and eyes. Perhaps a sideways grin on their faces as they did something naughty and looked

back at her to see if she had noticed. She had always wanted children, to be a mother, and today had only strengthened that desire. However, the image she conjured made her feel melancholy. She shook her head as if to clear it from her mind. *Time and place, Agatha.*

She sighed and looked over at Rupert who was sitting next to her. She started, realizing he had been watching her with a burning intensity that made her blush crimson from neck to hairline with embarrassment. She felt like he had been able to read her mind, to know what she had been imagining. It made her feel naked. Seeing her blush, his features relaxed and he gave her a small, soft smile that she answered with one of her own. *God, it feels like last summer again* , she thought, dropping her gaze to the dog beside her. It felt like it had been both just yesterday and also a lifetime ago.

Before taking the children back to Helen, the four of them stopped at the childrens' favorite restaurant, one that specialized in American style hamburgers and milkshakes. As they were all passing a very pleasant time, the owner of the restaurant, who was used to seeing Rupert regularly with Tabitha and Marcus, came over to the table. Upon seeing the four of them, he beamed at them, exclaiming, "Mr. Campbell-Black! It's so good to see you again! I had no idea you had *three* such beautiful children! I've only ever seen you with the two!"

Taggie snorted with laughter, strawberry milkshake coming out of her nose. She and both of the children giggled together, finding the owner's mistake very funny.

When Taggie looked across the table at Rupert, however, her smile froze on her lips. *What the fuck?* His face was deathly white, his expression stricken. An amused smile on her face, she chuckled and reached across the table, placing her hand over his, "Rupert, it's okay to laugh."

Her words, particularly the touch of her hand, snapped him out of it. He gave her a small, strained smile and forced a laugh. He entwined his fingers with hers. His heart skipped a beat when she squeezed his fingers, holding his gaze, her eyes warm. Taggie, mindful that they were at dinner with his young children, withdrew her hand and turned to Tabitha to ask her about her favorite subject at school. Rupert watched Taggie intently across the table. He had never been in love before, and he found it to be both the most transcendent and terrible thing he had ever experienced.

When they dropped off the children at Helen's home, Rupert got out to walk them to the door and Taggie waited in the car. Both Tabitha and Marcus stood on the step, just outside the door, frantically waving, screaming "BYE TAGGIE!" Laughing, she waved back.

As Taggie and Rupert drove off, Helen turned to her husband. "If she's more than a year out of school, I'll eat my hat."

He put his arm around her. "Rupert is the type that needs a woman to come home *to* , not a woman to come home *with* . It would take a bright-eyed, naive schoolgirl to volunteer to climb into that particular gilded cage. Although, it seems like he's quite serious about her.

He's never brought another conquest around like this before. Who knows, maybe the old dog is finally ready to settle down. Again."

The two of them drove back in a tense silence. Taggie could feel her heartbeat speed up the longer they were in the car alone together. She remembered how it had felt to have his fingers tangled with hers at the restaurant, how it had felt like a jolt of electricity every time their eyes met at Penscombe. It had felt like the old days—before Bas, before Cameron. She swallowed heavily and stole a sidelong glance at him. She let herself take in his profile, his cheekbones, jaw line, the lines of his neck descending into his starched shirt collar. She had always found him incredibly compelling, and despite everything, she felt that same old admiration welling up inside her. It was easy to see how he charmed every woman he had ever met, why she had been so elated and then devastated after that kiss in the Priory kitchen.

He was so different from Bas. Where Bas was always joking, relaxed, easygoing, Rupert was serious, tense, sharp, like he might cut you if you weren't careful. There was something exhilarating to Taggie about the idea that the *real* Rupert was hidden behind high walls, and that she was one of the few people who could broach them. It made her feel powerful, special to feel like she was the only one who could get close enough to him to navigate and potentially smooth out his serrated edges.

As they approached the turn into the driveway of the Priory, Rupert slowed to a stop. Both of them stared straight ahead, through the windshield. He made no move to turn to the left. Slowly, the two of them turned to look at each other and their eyes met. In less than a second, Rupert was driving again, past the Priory driveway, turning right down the drive to Penscombe. Taggie could hear the thumping of her pulse and felt like her body was on fire. She had recognized the silent entreaty in Rupert's desperate brown eyes, and she knew exactly what she had silently consented to. *After all, why shouldn't I? I've wanted this for so long.*

Both of them were breathing shallow and fast, Rupert's knuckles white on the steering wheel as he pulled the car in front of Penscombe and put it in park. They both turned, flushed, ready to lunge toward the other, when a sharp shriek from the front door of the house shocked them both back into reality.

"RUPERT. THANK GOD!"

Both of them noticed with horror that a hysterical, sobbing Sarah Stratton was on Rupert's front step, makeup streaming down her face. Neither of them had noticed her car when they arrived.

The sight of her sobered Taggie. Images of Sarah and Rupert in the coat-bedroom at the Joneses, playing tennis naked passed through her head. The heat in her veins started to cool. She got out of the car and made for the path across the valley, back to the Priory.

"TAG, WAIT." Rupert called, desperate, as he watched her walk away.

She turned and looked at him steadily. "I think you have your hands full here." She turned and stalked her way down the path. The warm anticipation he had felt in the car, all the blood he had felt rush to his groin as they had passed by the Priory driveway, drained from him. *So*

fucking close and she's gone. Again. He watched Taggie disappear down the path, moving out of sight in a cluster of trees, and he turned back to Sarah on his front step, sobbing hysterically. *Fuck me and my past decisions. They always come back to haunt me at the most inconvenient moments.*

Sarah, sobbing, clung to him, and he directed her inside. They sat in the parlor, where hours before, he had watched Taggie watch his children fondly—where he had imagined her watching their own children in the same room. Having Sarah here, sobbing about her woes with her husband Paul felt like a desecration of the memory.

"I just don't know what to do, Rupert. When we first started up years ago, he was still handsome, in his prime. But now, his body is gone, and I don't even want to touch him anymore. And I'm still young and beautiful. What, am I supposed to put myself up on the shelf because he's a frumpy snooze now? IT'S NOT FAIR. And James, he paid attention to me, made me feel beautiful, and now I'm pregnant. What am I to do???"

Rupert had been passively listening, absently nodding at the appropriate times, as he processed what Sarah said about starting up with Paul and then becoming disappointed with him as he aged while she remained young and vibrant. While Rupert still considered himself to be in his prime, he imagined himself in ten years, starting to wrinkle, losing his edge. Taggie, only then entering her prime, still a glowing goddess. He felt insecurity rear up inside of him, imagining a future, distraught Taggie saying the same things as Sarah, but to someone else. Lizzie? *Bas?* He was older than her, nearly 20 years older. Sarah's discontent could easily become Taggie's. With a creeping sense of despair, he recalled the restaurant owner's comment earlier that afternoon, thinking Taggie was his daughter. Of all the fears, hesitancies he had about pursuing Taggie, this hadn't necessarily been one of them until today. But now it bloomed bright and fierce inside of him. *I really am too fucking old for her.* His mind returned to his fantasy, and he presumed hers too, of *their* children playing in Penscombe. *I'm almost fucking 40. When they're grown, she'll be 40, and I'll be nearly 60.* He started to silently panic as he tried to soothe Sarah.

Finally, he calmed Sarah enough for her to drive back home, having validated her feelings and her desire to pursue James (as he knew Lizzie wouldn't be opposed). As he watched Sarah drive off, his mind filled with images of Taggie that day, her eyes, the feel of her hand on his at the restaurant, how clearly she had consented to coming back to Penscombe with him. He had waited for this for a year, more. He was frantic for her, and the idea that an ex-lover would show up on his doorstep and ruin everything was insufferable, particularly on the last day that Cameron and Declan would be gone. Rupert ran his hands through his hair and paced back and forth in front of the Penscombe parlor window, looking out across the valley at the Priory, feeling like he was losing his mind.

Taggie heard a frantic banging at the Priory front door. She opened it, and her whole body froze, then lit up. It was Rupert, out of breath, bent over, hands on his knees. He had clearly just run across the valley. His eyes were wild. "I—I'm—" He didn't finish the thought.

Taggie took one step backwards, then another, a silent invitation for him to enter. He crossed the threshold, slamming the door shut behind him, his eyes never leaving hers. A second passed, both of them standing alone in the Priory parlor, breathing heavily, eyes

locked. They came together with a quiet desperation, that summer night in the Priory kitchen in both of their minds as their hands and lips found each other.

Rupert immediately scooped her up in his arms and carried her upstairs to her bedroom. They frantically undressed each other, the momentum of a year's worth of longing carried forward into their fingertips, making them both clumsy. Rupert rapidly stripped off Taggie's bright blue jumper and went to work on the clasp of her black bra, the same one she had worn beside the fire earlier in the week. Taggie meanwhile, focused closely on Rupert's button-up shirt. Involuntarily, she thought *My unbuttoning skills have drastically improved* . The thought gave her a pang, and she shook her head to clear it, pressing her mouth to Rupert's in a desperate kiss, opening her mouth for his tongue, pulling his shirt back off of his torso. Her bra freed from her body, both of their hands quickly worked at the belt and button fly of the other. As their trousers hit the floor, Taggie pulled Rupert back toward her bed, and they fell backwards together, her legs wrapping around his waist, one of his hands pressing her face to his, the other running all over her bare torso. He cupped one of her breasts in his hand, running his thumb over her stiff nipple, eliciting a moan from her, into his mouth. "*God, Tag* ," he groaned, moving to press his lips to and lightly nip at the skin of her neck. She pressed her hips up against his, eliciting a desperate groan from Rupert. He had imagined this moment a million times and now that he was living it, he still wasn't prepared. To his surprise, he felt her hands sliding his boxers down over his hips. However he had imagined this, he hadn't expected her to be so confident, so eager, so relaxed about it all. He had always imagined her being shy and hesitant. *She had been living with Bas for months—of course he had already initiated her into the pleasures of the flesh*, he thought with some dismay. Rupert had coveted that educational role for himself. He grasped Taggie's chin in his hand and turned her face to look at him, his dark eyes feverish. "Can I touch you?" he rasped.

Taggie grinned up at him, her auburn hair fanned out on the pillow behind her. "Please."

He felt all of his blood rush to his cock, and he ripped down her underwear and threw them aside. He removed his hand from her chin and slowly trailed his fingers down her body. She gasped eagerly, arching her back as he traced down between her breasts, past her navel, to finally touch her hot, wet, core. The gasping moans she released as he softly pressed his knuckles against her, slowly circled her with his thumb, the way she clasped him to her and kissed him with a blind desperation and moved her hips against his hand, panting against his neck, her nails digging into his back—he felt like he had vacated all of his senses. He had done this a thousand times with a thousand other women, but it being *Taggie* pulling his hair as she tensed and then relaxed in his arms drove him mad. With one hand still tangled in his hair, she used the other to guide him into her. Taggie moved both of her hands to hold his face, her hips moving against his. Rupert shuddered and pressed her to him carefully, as if she was made of glass and he thought he might break her. Taggie laughed at his hesitancy, playfully frowning at him, wrapping her legs around his waist and pulling him in closer. Rupert felt euphoric—he loved the way they moved together, how it felt to be inside her, atop her, to look down into her bright blue eyes as she grinned up at him. They clung to each other, their faces in each others' necks, gasping and moaning until Rupert was spent and collapsed into her. Taggie looked up at him, laughing. Rupert's face had been intense, serious, but he laughed, too, seeing her amusement, and kissed her ardently.

Taggie had thoroughly enjoyed herself. *Good things come to those who wait ,* she thought, as she smiled up at him. *And now, he's mine. At least for tonight.*

He rolled off of her and took her in his arms, pressing her back into his front. Taggie sighed contentedly and closed her eyes, enjoying the solid feel of him against her. Rupert traced the line from her bare shoulder to her ear with his lips, savoring the shiver he felt run through Taggie's body as he did. When he reached her ear, he pressed his face into her hair. They laid like that for a few minutes. "I love you," Rupert whispered into her hair. Taggie's eyes snapped open and her heart started to pound. She worked to keep her breathing even, hoping Rupert would think she was asleep and hadn't heard him. She had waited *months* to hear those words, at one point, she would have *killed* to hear them. Now, raw as she was, they stirred a range of emotions in her—delight, anxiety, warmth, fear. *She wasn't the same person she had been last summer* . She knew that *she* had loved *him* , but the real nature of his feelings had always been something of a mystery to her. She knew he *wanted* her, *cared* for her, but given his relationship with Cameron, Taggie hadn't really known what to think. She had viewed tonight as something like both of them scratching an old itch, but with that declaration from Rupert, it had become something much more. She closed her eyes again, her mind racing, as his arms tightened around her.

Light started to filter through the curtains in Taggie's bedroom as dawn broke the next morning. All night, she had thought long and hard about Rupert's declaration and what her own feelings were. With his arms around her, his face in her hair, she had felt the first inklings of hope, a promise of happiness, since Bas had left. Rupert had *run* all the way here, carried her upstairs, told her he loved her. He had been the first person she had really loved, and she knew that she did still love him, even if she felt much changed since their kiss in the summer. In the night, Taggie had decided she would let this wave take her, let *him* take her. She had waited long enough for this. She pushed out of her mind Bas's cynical prediction that Rupert would come for her and she would promptly fall into his arms. *It doesn't matter if Bas was right. I'm happy.*

The blankets around her waist, a very pleased smile on her face, she stretched her arms above her head and rolled over to greet Rupert. He was already awake, propped up on his elbow, watching her with an intensity that momentarily left her disconcerted. She quickly recovered herself and reached for him, running her hand slowly down his chiseled, bare chest, a sincere smile on her face. *I've wanted to do this for a year, and I finally have* , she thought with delight.

"I—I need to go, Tag. Your father, Cameron, they could be back anytime," he whispered.

Taggie snapped her eyes up to meet his, like he had called her a slur, her smile evaporating from her lips, her face suddenly cold and hard.

After the hell of the last ten days, it had felt like things might finally be good for her again. She had expected that his declaration of love would mean that things had changed between them in a meaningful way. *But no—he's leaving so he doesn't get caught—doesn't ruin the fucking franchise application, have to deal with Cameron, have to deal with my father.* Taggie had spent most of the week being angry at Bas for being a coward, and Rupert had been a welcome distraction. However, now she saw the same cowardice in Rupert. Somehow, it galled her more in Rupert, given everything that had passed between them before last night—the months of pent-up longing, the whispers, glances, the kiss in the kitchen in the summer,

then finally last night, which had felt like everything suddenly falling into place. *But nothing has changed. He's still willing to put me back on the shelf to suit himself,* she thought with bitter disappointment.

Rupert saw Taggie's expression tighten and become cold, and he instantly regretted mentioning Cameron's name, *especially now* . "Tag, I know it's not ideal, but I meant what I said last night. I do love you, I have *never* loved anyone how I've loved you," Rupert whispered, his voice thick with emotion. Taggie was momentarily moved, until he began again, "but things are complicated, and it's just two more weeks, two more weeks and all of this will be resolved, and then us, *this* is all that matters. I promise you."

As Rupert emphasized the word "this," he gestured between his and Taggie's bodies with his index finger, just as Bas had that night in his flat when he told her 'I can't do *this* anymore.' The memory made her angry. *These fucking grown men, acting like I'm being unreasonable when they're the ones acting like idiots. Bas literally wouldn't let me finish my sentences, and now here is Rupert, explaining to me how I'm all that matters, but just not for another two weeks because "business."*

It didn't matter to her then that the application was due in two weeks and that the end was in sight. It was the principle of the thing. *In the end, both of those assholes chose themselves* .

Taggie felt her heart ice over, and she withdrew her hand from Rupert's chest and pulled the blankets up to cover herself. "I understand," she said flatly, her eyes cold.

Rupert, understanding he was being censured, suddenly felt defensive. "Okay," he chuckled with a small smirk, hoping to break the tension. When Taggie didn't smile back at him and her icy stare didn't waver, he felt his stomach drop. *Fuck, I need to fix this* .

"Tag, I mean it—I—"

"Please go," Taggie said.

Rupert, starting to panic because of her sudden about-face, started to sputter, reaching for her. Taggie scrambled away from his hands, nearly falling out of her bed on the other side. She ripped the blankets off of the bed to keep herself covered, standing between the bed and the window, the strengthening light of the morning lighting up her hair, creating a glowing red halo around her head. *An avenging Angel,* Rupert thought, as he watched her expression harden.

Then, he noticed the edges of her mouth start to tremble and cracks appear in her determination as she clutched the blankets to herself. He made as if to gather her up in his arms, hold her, as if the idea of her tears was too much for him. Seeing his movement, she shrank into the corner and started to shake her head, her voice thick, "Please just go, Rupert."

"Tag, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispered, frozen in his position on the bed.

She met his eyes now and gave him a weak, almost pitying, smile. "I know you are, Rupert."

Those words did little to reassure him. If anything, they caused anxiety to grip him more tightly. His jaw worked, unsure of what to say, when she spoke again, this time softly, barely above a whisper. "Go, Rupert. You're right. They'll be back soon, and I don't want to explain this any more than you do."

"Okay," he whispered, holding her gaze. He sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and then turned to collect his clothes off of the floor. She stood there, wrapped in blankets in the corner of the room, and watched him dress. He paused at her bedroom door, his hand on the knob. He turned and gave her a small half-smile, "Bye, Tag."

When he closed the door behind him, Taggie slowly sank to the floor and sat in her puddle of blankets, staring at the door, listening to his footsteps on the stairs outside her bedroom, then the slam of the Priory front door. The parallelism of the entire scene with the one she had acted out with Bas a week prior made her want to scream. *Between the two of them, they'll be the death of me.*

Taggie eventually made her way down to the kitchen, feeling numb, and she automatically opened a drawer and reached for the crumpet rings. She looked down at the thin rings of metal in her hands and suddenly found herself filled with rage. In a flurry, she ransacked the entire kitchen, tearing everything out of all the drawers and cabinets. She found every crumpet ring she owned and wrapped them up in a tea towel. She stalked to the garage with her bundle and picked up the sledgehammer in the corner. The tears started to come then, as she desperately pounded flat (or as flat as possible) every single one of the thin metal rings against the concrete floor. *No more fucking crumpets.*

Rupert walked back across the valley to Penscombe and dressed for a day at Parliament. If Cameron arrived back early, she wouldn't see anything amiss, just him getting ready for the day. *Cameron.* The thought of her coming back that day made him feel like a caged animal. He thought of Taggie's face, how it had frozen when he mentioned Cameron, how he had tried to explain why they needed to wait just another two weeks. Not only was he standing for re-election in that same window (so a scandal was not ideal), but if Cameron jumped ship on Venturer, his entire 7 million pound loan would be down the toilet, as without Cameron, the bid had no chance. It would put his estate at risk, his family legacy, his children's inheritance. He and Taggie had already been through so much, waited for so long, that they could weather an additional two weeks. But he had seen how her face hardened and then fell when she realized he was leaving her again, going back to the same old charade, even if just for a short time. He knew it was selfish of him, but he had convinced himself it was *necessary* .

Besides, if he didn't have his estate, his position in Parliament, all of the posh trappings that made him *him* , how could he ever expect to deserve someone like Taggie? His mind raced back to the previous day's conversations with the restaurant owner and Sarah Stratton. Taggie might take him just as he was, but he needed more than just *himself* to offer her. He scoffed at the idea of it. *Rupert Campbell-Black, rapidly approaching the end of his prime, without the money, the estate, the status, is merely a circle of hell to be endured. Taggie deserved better, she deserved everything.*

As Rupert adjusted his tie in the mirror, he ran through that day's to-do list and mentally added one additional item. That addition helped him breathe a little easier, and he smiled at himself in the mirror. To his chagrin and also relief, Cameron didn't arrive back before he had to leave for London. *Maybe their flight was cancelled.* He thought of the pained look on Taggie's face when he had said he needed to leave. *You fucking coward. You could have spent*

an extra two hours there, and instead you bolted like some university twat after a one-night stand.

When Rupert arrived back from London that night, Cameron was back at Penscombe. He noticed that her demeanor was lighter, easier than it had been in some time. Distracted by his own concerns, he didn't give it another thought. For the next few days, Rupert studiously avoided the Priory, not wanting to arouse anyone's suspicions, but every night he stared desperately across the valley, like a part of him had been carved out and installed there. *This fucking application couldn't be submitted soon enough.*

After her night with Rupert, Taggie went back to work at the Bar Sinister kitchen with a new layer of melancholy weighing on her. Moriah didn't ask for any details. The routine of the kitchen comforted Taggie. Every night, though, she went back to the Priory and tried to sleep in her bed, being constantly reminded of that night and the following morning. Since Cameron and Declan had returned, Rupert hadn't visited or called the Priory once. At one time, Taggie would have given anything for Rupert to make a declaration of love to her, no matter the contingencies or conditions. But now that he had, it seemed hollow and very unsatisfying. The conditions, secrecy, always feeling like his second priority overwhelmed any excitement she felt. She didn't know what to think or feel, other than disappointed and sad. She kept the sliver of Bas's jumper cuff in her pocket and felt very pathetic every time she pulled it out and ran her fingers over it. *Were all men this disappointing?*

On Monday, four days after Declan and Cameron returned from Ireland, there was a massive storm forecasted for Rutshire. Declan didn't consider it to be worth worrying about and scheduled a meeting with Cameron at Bar Sinister that night. Rupert, as he would be returning from Parliament that day, would miss most of it anyway, so he decided to just go straight home to Penscombe. Just after he returned, the storm set in. *Declan should have been concerned.* The wind was some of the worst Rupert had ever seen in Rutshire, and due to the cold temperatures, the rain turned to sleet, slamming sideways into the windows, coming down in sheets. It sounded like someone was frantically throwing thousands of tiny beads against his windows. The sound was eerie in his empty house, and it upset the dogs. Through the onslaught, he could just make out the glow of lights at the Priory across the valley. He smiled, knowing that Taggie was at least safe inside. Rupert thought about the flooding that was predicted—travel by car would be a mess, was already untenable, really, even between Penscombe and the Priory. He went to the phone, planning to call Cameron and tell her to stay in town, as driving back on the flooded roads wouldn't be safe or even possible. As his hand touched the phone receiver, all the lights in Penscombe went out. *Fuck, there goes the power.* He lifted the phone. No dial tone. *Fuck.*

Fumbling in the dark, he managed to find and light a candle and went to go stand by the parlor window. The Priory was also dark. He felt a pang in his chest as he thought of Taggie, also cut off from the world and in the dark across the valley, alone in that big house. He closed his eyes and remembered how it had felt to wrap her up in his arms, be tangled up with her in the darkness. It had only been a few days ago, but it felt like an eternity. *If only she was here, or I was there—the darkness, the dead phones—it wouldn't matter, it would be a boon.*

Images of their night together flashed through his mind—the feel of her breast in his hand, how she had laughed softly in his ear when he was on top of her, her hand running down his bare chest, how her blue eyes had bored into him when she opened the Priory door and silently invited him in.

He turned from the window and walked to a small safe on the bookshelves behind him. Setting the candle on the shelf, Rupert opened the safe and rifled through stacks of papers until he found a small box tucked into the back corner. He pulled it out and slowly opened it, revealing a gold ring topped with a massive diamond. The day after he spent the night at the Priory, the day Cameron and Declan returned, before Rupert came back from London, he had stopped by his family's safety deposit box in their London bank, and retrieved this ring. The vault attendant had given Rupert a meaningful look, as he knew the Campbell-Black collection well and knew that ring was the ancestral family engagement ring.

As Rupert watched the candlelight refract off of the diamond, he fought the urge to run across the dark, soggy valley and present it to Taggie, beg her to marry him and put him out of his misery. He tried to reason with himself. He couldn't ask her to keep it a secret like that for ten days. He would see this Venturer business through, keep Cameron pacified, then he would do it all above-board. He had waited this long, he could wait a little longer.

He pulled a small square out of his front shirt pocket and unfolded it. Despite only being a few days old, it was already heavily creased from being repeatedly unfolded and re-folded. He ran his finger over Taggie's face in the photo. It was one he had taken while she played with his children on the Penscombe grounds—she was standing, facing him, her head tilted to the side, her long ponytail visible just behind her arm. She was smiling at him, softly, fondly—much like she had the morning at the Priory before he told her he needed to leave. He exhaled unsteadily, folding and returning the photo to his pocket. He felt like he hadn't slept more than an hour or two on any night since that ring had taken up residence in his safe.

Rupert returned to the window, gazing again across the valley, in his crisp white shirt and black trousers, nervously spinning the small box around in his hand. Taggie was a beam of light in his darkness, and he had gotten a taste of what it would be like to *live* in that light, and he couldn't fathom that any life without her would be worth living. *If she would have me without the rest of it, the estate, the politics, I should get over myself and fucking lunge at the opportunity.* The longer he looked out at the Priory, wreathed in fog, and listened to the furious pounding of the rain, the more his resolve to wait out those last ten days weakened.

Seeing the forecast and knowing it would be slow, Moriah had told Taggie to just stay home and she would manage the Bar kitchen. So when the power went out, Taggie was at the Priory. She swore softly and lit a candle. She started a fire in the fireplace in the room with the television just outside the kitchen. She trekked upstairs and gathered a massive stack of blankets from the linen closet and pulled her red nightgown on, along with a thick pair of socks, and a wool jumper. Taggie pulled the sofa up close to the fireplace, wrapped herself in the blankets, and heated water in one of the kettles near the flames to make tea. She picked up the phone, intending to call Declan at the Bar, but when she lifted the receiver, there was no dial tone. She sighed and returned the phone to its cradle. Based on the anticipated level of flooding and the low lie of the road to the Priory, the roads would likely be underwater and

impassable by car until at least tomorrow, meaning Declan was unlikely to return home that night anyway. She might as well hole up here and try to stay warm.

Taggie had started to doze off in her nest of blankets on the sofa when she was startled awake by a frantic pounding on the front door. She sat bolt upright, thinking she must be hallucinating. *Who the fuck could be out in this weather?* She waited, and there was a moment of silence, only the sound of the wind and hammering of sleet against the windows. Then the desperate banging started up again. Both concerned and confused, she took her candle and went to the front door. She swung it open, and the cold, howling wind quickly snuffed out the candle. But in that split second, the candlelight had briefly illuminated the person at the Priory door. His dark hair was plastered to his skull, both of hands on his head, and he looked completely demented. His eyes were wild, with dark circles under them, like he hadn't slept in days. He was soaking wet, and his white shirt clung to his chest. His black trousers were caked in mud up to the knees, and he was gasping for breath as if he had run all the way there. Given the cold, steam rolled off of his body. The extinguished candle slid from Taggie's hand and clattered to the floor. It was Bas.

10. Endgame

After that horrible, drunken night out with the redhead, the choripan, the public vomiting and weeping, Bas took the next day to recover. *I'm getting too old for this* . He spent the next few days sober, actually working with the horses. He didn't feel like hungover shit, but it was impossible not to think about *everything* . With every day that passed, he felt himself getting more antsy. On Friday, after he had been there for a full week, he mindlessly curried a horse in the stables, thinking about what was going on back in Rutshire—Cameron and Declan would be back now. There would be just under two weeks until everything was decided. It had been just over a week since he had left, but it felt like an eternity. He went to bed that night and laid awake, staring at the ceiling, finally allowing himself to feel how lonely he felt, how empty his bed was, *his life* was. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see her, hear her, feel her. He kept replaying those last moments before he had left her in his flat—the look on her face, how she had cried in his arms and begged him not to leave. *The look on her face when he did leave.* How he had cut her off repeatedly in his flat that night after the polo match, terrified she would say something that would make him decide to stay, something that he so desperately wanted to hear and believe. All he wanted was to put his arms around her again, talk to her, press his forehead against hers, laugh as their bodies came together.

He got out of bed and started to pace around the room. Since he had stopped getting drunk every night, he hadn't really slept and his head was always foggy. He paused beside the desk, staring at the phone. He had stared at it a hundred times since he had arrived, imagining picking it up and calling the Priory, telling her he was sorry for being such a shit, such a coward, accusing her of wanting Rupert when she had been nothing but loyal, even when he hadn't asked it of her. Then he remembered again the broken look on her face that last morning and he thought better of it. *That was unforgivable* . But this Friday, as he paced, he looked at the phone again, desperate to talk to her, to apologize. He really did love her, and even if he was afraid that she didn't, couldn't really love him, he knew he had still devastated her when he left. He had treated her like complete shit both of those last nights they spent together in his flat. *But no phone call can repair that* .

He then started to think about the application submission deadline, now less than two weeks away. He had been in Argentina for over a week. It had gradually been dawning on him over the past few days that by running here, he had robbed both of them of their last few weeks together. *Even if she did end up choosing Rupert once it was all said and done, we could have had nearly another month together before that happened.* And instead, he was here, alone, hungover, useless, pacing the floor in the middle of the night, and he had broken her. He tried to tell himself it would have been selfish for him to stay, but he knew the selfish thing was what he had actually done—running away. How he left things with her was awful. The more he thought about it, the more ashamed he felt. He needed to tell her he was sorry, that no one should ever treat her that way, but there was no way he could do that over the phone. *She needed to hear it in person.* He spent the next day turning over in his mind the idea of going back to England, even just for a day, to apologize to her for having been so wildly unfair and cowardly.

That Sunday, he spent the day with the horses, still running through everything in his mind. He was so distracted that he was useless doing anything other than rote tasks, so he elected to muck out the stables. After he had furiously shoveled every pile of manure in the entire complex, he showered, his mind still racing. As he dressed, he stared at the phone. Once he finished buttoning his shirt he lifted the receiver and called himself a cab to the airport. He booked himself on the next flight back to London.

It didn't matter if she hated him and didn't want to see him ever again. It didn't matter if she had already taken up with Rupert. He needed her to know he was sorry and that she deserved better than how he had treated her. Moriah was right—this was the worst thing he had ever done, and he needed Taggie to at least know that he knew that. He needed their last conversation to be an apology, not that nightmare morning in his flat. *She deserved at least that much.*

When he landed in London late on Monday afternoon, the sky was a dark grey and it had started to drizzle. He didn't think anything of it and went about trying to get a taxi. However, he soon realized that the weather forecast for Rutshire was quite dire, and due to the escalating volume of rain, no cabs wanted to drive that direction. Finally, he convinced one cab to take him, using the promise of a double fare. As they drove and it started to get dark, the rain poured down in sheets, making visibility almost nil. Bas suspected the cab was about two miles from the Priory when the driver hit his brakes, noting the knee-deep stream of water coursing over the road ahead of them. The driver refused to continue, undeterred by the promise of a triple or quadruple fare. In the back seat, Bas started to panic. He was so close, he needed to get to her, he couldn't turn back now. Like an idiot, he hadn't packed anything but had simply walked on the plane in his fucking Argentinian summer street clothes. He decided to pay the driver and get out, in the dark in the middle of a winter flood, and hoof it the rest of the way. It would be a feat in normal weather in this clothing, but it was especially stupid, given the cold and the wet. The driver gave him a long look, as if he was preparing to identify Bas's body to the medical examiner the next morning, took his cash, and drove off.

Bas gasped as he walked through the cold stream of water running across the road, as the force and volume of it nearly carried him off of his feet. The feeling of his shoes being completely filled with freezing water was particularly unpleasant. Within a minute, he was completely soaking wet, and he could feel a chill setting in. *Fuck* . In order to try to keep warm, he decided to try to jog the rest of the way on the side of the road. It wasn't particularly effective. Finally, after what felt like hours squishing in wet shoes through all kinds of mud and cold water, he could see the driveway into the Priory off the main gravel road. By this point, he had started to shiver violently and the rain had turned to sleet which pelted and stung his face, and his feet and legs were completely covered in mud, and his hands and feet were numb.

When he saw the lights were all off at the Priory, he started to panic. When he banged on the door and no one answered, he started to despair. Not only was no one there, but the weather was absolute *shit* . He was soaked through *and* freezing and could feel himself going numb, his mind getting foggy. He would soon be in trouble. He *really* hadn't thought this one out. *I could always walk down to Penscombe* , he thought bitterly. His next thought was that the Priory was empty and dark because Taggie may be holed up across the valley with Rupert. He pounded on the door one last time. *Nothing* . He took a step back from the door, putting his hands on his head. *I'm totally fucked.* He was staring at the door, trying to decide if he

would rather die of hypothermia on the Priory stoop or go to Penscombe for his final humiliation when the Priory door opened. Before the wind blew out the candle, he caught a glimpse of who had opened the door. *It was Taggie.*

He slowly lowered his arms to his sides, tilting his head to the side, sighing. For a moment, he forgot how cold, soggy, and numb he was. *God, just being able to look at her. Why the fuck did I ever leave in the first place?*

They stared at each other in silence for a moment, then Taggie took two rapid steps forward and shoved him as hard as she could, backwards, off the step. Not caring that she didn't have shoes on and that it was freezing rain, she followed him outside, pushing him backwards again, clearly angry and on the verge of tears. Bas let her keep shoving him until they were both squarely in the middle of the driveway, completely soaked. *This is the only welcome I deserve.*

As she felt the sleet soak her own clothes, Taggie stared at Bas, her eyes taking him in, trying to convince herself that she wasn't hallucinating. *He was really here.*

She was *so angry* at him, but seeing him also made her want to cry with relief. She both wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until his head fell off and also drag him back inside and snog him senseless. *What the hell was he doing here?* She was about to shove him again when she noticed, even in the rainy darkness, that both his lips and face were both a concerning shade of white and that his entire body was shuddering. *Jesus, how long had he been out in this? Of course he shows up on my front step hypothermic.* She frowned, took his hand, and pulled him inside.

Once she got him beside the light of the fire where she could see him more clearly, she started to actually worry. His entire body was shaking and his teeth were chattering. "Bas, how long were you out in this?"

He started to rub his hands against his saturated shirtsleeves. "An hour? Two? Maybe five? I have no idea."

"We have to get you out of these clothes."

She knew things were serious when he didn't take the opportunity to crack a joke, but just nodded his head and tried to start unbuttoning his shirt. She watched him struggle with the top button for about twenty seconds, his fingers too numb to unfasten it. She took his hands and placed them down at his sides. "Let me help."

He stood there shivering violently, looking and feeling like a drowned rat, looking down at Taggie while she efficiently unbuttoned his shirt, as she had dozens of times before. *Even my grand gesture ends up with her having to do more dirty work. I'm such a fucking mess.* She hung it over a chair that she had pulled next to the fire. She directed him to sit on the chair while she removed his mud-caked shoes and socks, then systematically removed his belt, trousers, underwear. As she undressed him, her anger started to fade ever so slightly, bits of amusement filling in the gaps. *This was all so impulsive, so chaotic, so fucking Bas . Of course he flew in from Argentina to England in the middle of winter without a coat. And then of course he decided to run through a flood.*

"Come on, then," she whispered as she pulled him over to the sofa and wrapped him in a blanket, covering the top of his head, directing him to lie down in the nest of blankets she had

created for herself. She looked down at her own saturated clothes and gave Bas a long look, as he laid burritoed on the sofa, his teeth chattering. Making up her mind, she pulled the jumper off of herself, now heavy and saturated with water. She then pulled her wet nightgown over her head and hung it on the chair with his clothes, then peeled off her underwear, and finally her muddy socks, lying them on the floor. Still shivering, prone on the sofa, Bas opened his blanket cocoon and she crawled in with him. They shared a pillow, their faces a few inches apart, their bodies not touching. Even from that distance, Taggie could feel how cold he was, and the intensity of his shivering was making the sofa vibrate. She took a deep breath, steeling herself not only against the cold but also against the idea of touching him again, and she pressed herself against him, tucking her head under his chin, pressing her forehead against the cold metal of the gold chain he wore. *He feels like ice* , she thought, concerned again, as his frigid arms encircled her and held her tightly to him. Despite the shock of the cold of his skin, she felt herself relax into him. She exhaled unsteadily and slowly wrapped her arms around him, thinking about the last time they had lain together like this. When she felt his face press into the top of her head, she started to cry.

After God knows how long, due to the fire, the lack of wet clothes, the blankets, her body heat, he finally stopped shuddering. There was no way she could fall asleep, given the circumstances, so she pulled away from him and adjusted herself so her head was up on the pillow, facing him. He was also awake. They laid like that for a minute, looking at each other.

Bas was the one to break the silence. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

Taggie looked back at him evenly, her blue eyes bright with unshed tears, pressing her lips together.

“I was a complete shit, a coward. I know ‘sorry’ doesn’t begin to cover it, but I am.”

She still didn’t respond, her eyes locked with his.

“I should never have left like that.”

Still, Taggie said nothing, a single tear escaping from the corner of her eye and running down over the bridge of her nose.

“I had to tell you sorry in person. You deserved so much better than what I did.”

“You wouldn’t let me say it,” she whispered, her voice cracking as she placed her hand on his cheek. “Why wouldn’t you let me say it?”

Bas’s face fell and it was his turn not to speak.

“Can I say it now?” she asked softly.

He nodded.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“Say it again?” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

“I love you, Bas.”

He tried and largely failed to muster a sideways grin, “Just one more time?” he asked.

She smiled softly, tracing her thumb along his bottom lip—the bottom half of the grin she had imagined in miniature in the Penscombe parlor. She leaned forward and kissed him, and he held her tightly against him. When they parted, Taggie pressed her forehead against his. “I missed you,” she whispered.

He pulled her in to kiss her again, rolling them over so she was on top of him. His face serious, his dark eyes soft, he reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I love you,” he whispered.

Taggie bit her bottom lip, a half-smile on her face. “Say it again?” she teased.

His face worked, and he tried to laugh, but it came out sounding like a strangled gasp. “I love you, Agatha O’Hara,” he whispered, his voice breaking as her full name left his lips.

Taggie’s face suddenly became serious. “Promise me you won’t leave me like that again?”

He linked his hands together at the small of her back. “I’ll be here for as long as you want me to be.” He believed she loved him, but he still couldn’t fully trust that she would *choose* him in the end. *I’ll take whatever she’s willing to give me.*

She exhaled contentedly and relaxed on top of him, pressing her face into his neck. “When was the last time you ate anything? If you were running around in the storm for hours and, I assume, came right from the airport?”

He started to laugh, and she relished the sound, the vibrations it sent through her own chest. “You’re incorrigible, you know that, don’t you?” He asked, craning his own head back to catch her eye. She giggled and hid her face in his shoulder as he ran his hand through her damp hair.

“Well, *I’m* starving, but if you don’t want anything, then I won’t compel you.”

“Hey, hey, hey, I never said I didn’t have an appetite,” he quipped with a grin. He sat up, with her now straddling him in his lap, tangled both of his hands in her hair, and kissed her with an intensity that made her forget where she was. “God, I’ve missed you, Tag. Missed *this,”* he whispered, his voice rough, as he moved his mouth to her neck and ran his hands all over her bare torso, tracing down her spine, over her breasts, pausing to slowly run his fingers over her hard nipples, making her gasp in his ear. It had only been ten days, but to him, it felt like it had been an eternity. Forgetting her growling stomach, Taggie closed her eyes and tilted her head to the side, biting her bottom lip, luxuriating in the feel of his hands on her skin, how it made her entire body light up. *Those fucking hands.* She twisted her fingers in his hair and pulled him up to kiss her, sliding her tongue in his mouth and pressing her hips down into his. He groaned and tangled one hand in her hair and with the other, grabbed her waist and helped her grind into him. Taggie was pleased to note that he was already rock-hard. She pulled away and grabbed him by the shoulders and leaned backwards, pulling him down on top of her. When he started to kiss a line from her throat down to her navel, she felt a warm twist of anticipation in her stomach. She let her legs fall to the side, and she arched her back, gasping with a grin, when she felt his tongue on her.

When she felt herself melt into the combination of his mouth and hands, she reached down to touch his head and whispered, “Come here,” as she sat up. She knew from previous experience that if she left him to it, he would try to coax every orgasm he could from her. *But tonight I want him* . He again pulled her in and kissed her senseless. She pressed her forehead

to his, meeting his eyes as she rasped, “How do you want me?” Just hearing her *ask* that made him feel insane. His mind flashed to the times at his flat when she had taken him in her mouth, how it felt like the universe began and ended with her head in his lap, as he ran his hands through her hair. *I want to look at her.* He slid his hands under her and pulled her onto his lap, with her straddling him like the first time they had slept together, the night after the Hunt Ball, and he leaned back against the arm of the sofa. Taggie took him in her hand and slowly slid him into her. Savoring the feeling of having him inside her again, she looked at him in the firelight. His dark eyes were bright, eager and he wore a wide smile. *He really is beautiful.*

He grasped her hips with both of his hands, helping to set their pace, both of her hands pressed against his chest. He took in all the curves of her, the way her long hair spilled over her shoulders, the flush creeping over her white chest and neck. When he noticed her bite her bottom lip, he gasped out a laugh. *I fucking love her.* She grinned at him and also started to laugh, then immediately stopped, gasping out, “Oh, Bas, *fuck* ,” as he pulled her hips down firmly onto him, once, twice, and he felt her clench around him. He suddenly sat up. “Kiss me,” he breathed. Taggie laughed and kissed him ardently, her hands in his hair, as he pressed her down onto him again and rolled his hips up into her, following her over the edge. *God, she was everything* .

Spent and breathless, she sank down onto his chest, and he rolled onto his side to allow her to lie flat on her back. Their eyes met and they both laughed as Taggie pulled him to her and he rested his head on her chest, his cheek rising and falling rapidly as she tried to catch her breath.

Taggie relished how fun, how easy and natural it all felt. Being with Bas, in bed and otherwise, felt like breathing. It always had, really. He didn’t require any subterfuge or strategy, there were no high walls to scale or sharp edges to navigate. Having him back with her like this made everything seem brighter, lighter. She ran her hand over his back, tracing her finger over the small scar on his shoulder. She sobered at the thought of high walls and sharp edges. *I have to tell him about Rupert.* There was no way she could keep something like that a secret from him. But she remembered how he had completely melted down just seeing Rupert look at her, and she was terrified that this revelation would send him back to Argentina again, maybe for good. She wasn’t ashamed or even regretful of sleeping with Rupert, but she dreaded how Bas would react. When she had asked him to promise not to leave her again, she had been thinking of her night with Rupert. She wanted to believe Bas would still stay after she told him, but she remembered that night in his flat after the polo match, his insistence that Rupert would always be the one for her. She felt her heart start to race under Bas’s cheek. She closed her eyes and tried to force the anxiety out of her mind. *That can be tomorrow’s problem. We deserve to enjoy tonight.*

Bas, who hadn’t slept through the night in nearly two weeks, pulled a blanket over them and felt himself start to drift off, comforted by the rise and fall of Taggie’s breath, the feel of her hands on his back, her warm skin under his cheek. He had been such a *moron* . By running off, he had willingly sacrificed nearly two weeks of *this* . Even if Taggie decided to go off with Rupert once everything was submitted, Bas could still have *this* for ten more days. Being next to her like this felt like sunbathing on a beach in summer—lit up, warm, at ease. He was determined to soak in every second he had left. *I’ve wasted enough time* .

When light beamed through the Priory windows, the two of them were still asleep on the sofa but had adjusted positions. Now Taggie was half sprawled over Bas, her long hair fanned out over his face. When Bas woke, he sputtered and tried blowing the long tendrils out of his face, shocked by it, and feeling like he was being smothered. The sounds jolted Taggie awake, scaring her. Her sitting bolt upright solved the problem and when they made eye contact, they both started to laugh.

With the power still out, there was no way to wash Bas's disgusting clothes, so the two of them wrapped themselves in blankets and wandered upstairs to see if there was anything in Declan's closet that Bas could wear. While their measurements in terms of width weren't particularly different, Bas was much taller than Declan, so everything made him look like a teenager who had just experienced the world's fastest growth spurt, which they both found very amusing. They both decided that was better than wearing yesterday's clothes or being stark naked in the house if someone should arrive.

The old house was cold, so they stoked the fire and rummaged up a strange half-meal from dry goods in the pantry and ate it cross-legged on a blanket in front of the fire, their knees touching. As they did, Taggie filled in Bas on the latest gossip from the Bar, mostly that Moriah and Elizabeth had definitely moved in together, and he told her about Argentina, admitting that he had spent most of his time there drunk, hungover, or mucking stables. He did mention that he thought her chorizo was every bit as good as Argentinian fare, as he had been able to sample some while he was there. That particular compliment pleased her.

There was a brief lull in their conversation, which to Bas felt like a comfortable silence. However, when he looked over at Taggie, he saw her face was pale and she looked mildly ill.

"I need to tell you something."

Given her expression, Bas's heart dropped down into his feet. *This is going to be bad.*

"I slept with Rupert."

"When?"

"Last week."

It took all of Bas's focus to keep his breathing steady and to not panic. He knew that given how he had blown everything up, he had no real right to feel any sort of way about anything Taggie did. God knows he had fucked a stranger in the last week (and would have fucked a second). But this particular revelation confirmed all of his worst fears. In fact, it was worse than his worst fears. Suddenly the fantasy of 10 days of bliss Bas had in his mind started to collapse. *It's already happened. I'm too late.*

He tried very hard to keep his voice even. "So are you with Rupert now?"

Taggie frowned sharply, then her face relaxed. She resented the question, given the last hours she and Bas had spent together, but given everything, especially Rupert's own declaration, it wasn't necessarily a *stupid* question. It was just one that she didn't want to have to answer. "No."

She watched his posture visibly relax, then tense again.

"Do you want to be?" He asked in a quiet whisper, staring into the fire.

Taggie reached over and took his hand. "No. I don't want to be anyone's secret, anyone's second choice."

He supposed that should have reassured him, and it did, to some extent. But he couldn't help but wonder, *And after that application is submitted, when you wouldn't be a second choice or a secret?* He mustered a half-smile and squeezed her hand. He repeated his mantra — *I'll take whatever time I have left.* He found it gave him less comfort than it had a few hours earlier.

It was late morning now and while everything was a muddy, icy mess, the storm had passed. Across the valley, Rupert was still standing in front of the parlor window in Penscombe when Cameron pulled up in front of the house. Rupert hadn't slept that night and had made up his mind to end things with Cameron when she returned that morning. It didn't matter what the consequences were—he couldn't wait any more, and he wouldn't make Taggie keep anything else a secret.

When Cameron came into the house, she found him standing by the window, looking exhausted. She didn't notice the small black box he still had clutched in his hand. "Rupert, we need to talk."

He looked at her steadily. "I agree."

Cameron crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm moving out. This isn't working for either of us, and it's time we just call it."

Rupert reeled, physically taking two steps backward. Cameron relished the shock she saw on his face. Rupert's mouth started to work, "Wh—Where is this coming from?"

Cameron gave him a small smirk as her mind replayed the events of the last week. While on-location in Ireland, she and Declan's latent tension had continued to build. She thought he was arrogant, hot-headed, and infuriating, but he understood television, he understood *her* . She also thought he was a genius when it came to elements of broadcasting. And despite how gruff he could be with her, she knew he admired her, too. As a result, the two of them were late returning to Rutshire the previous week because they were furiously fucking on top of Cameron's dresser in her hotel room when they should have been at the airport. When Cameron returned to Penscombe after that trip, to a sullen and distracted Rupert, she felt more frustrated than ever before.

So when Declan had called her and suggested they meet in Cotchester the night of the storm, she didn't care about the forecast. She jumped at the opportunity. *Why not have some shop talk with someone brilliant who gives me a little thrill?* The two of them had been the only ones in the Bar Sinister when the power went out, the other clientele having left well in advance of the storm. A tall blonde woman in an apron had approached their table in the darkness with two candles and addressed Declan, telling him he was welcome to stay in the flat upstairs for the night, since Bas was out of the country and the roads would be shit. Moriah gave Cameron a meaningful look, then looked back at Declan. "Go ahead, make it a sleepover. Fuck if I care." She left one of the candles at their table and went back to the

kitchen. The two of them had gone up to Bas's flat and both silently agreed to set up in what they assumed to be the guest room.

The next morning, as Cameron dressed and the power came back on in town, she made up her mind to end things with Rupert. *It's been a total waste of my time and energy* . She felt lighter having made the decision. Declan noticed and commented on her shift in mood, and she told him what she was on her way to do. He leaned back against the headboard and grinned at her. "Well, if you need somewhere to land while you find another place, there's plenty of space in the Priory." Realizing he was serious, Cameron started to laugh. *This is the most unhinged, incestuous place on the face of the fucking planet.*

Returning to the present, Cameron looked at Rupert. "I haven't been happy in a long time, and you haven't, either. It's time. I'm going to pack my things this morning, and I'll be gone by the afternoon." She had expected to feel something—regret, grief, sadness—when this ended, but she found that she really felt nothing. *I think I already grieved the end of this months ago* , she thought. She watched Rupert furrow his brow, his mind clearly racing. It was then that she noticed the ring box in his hand. Her heart stopped for a moment. *Fuck, he didn't intend to propose to me, did he??* But she looked back at his face and it clicked. *It's for Taggie O'Hara* . A grin broke out over Cameron's face. *Maybe I should suggest we carpool—I can move into a spare room in the Priory while he pops the question, all in one trip.*

Rupert was slowly realizing that where he had thought himself central and necessary to everything, it probably hadn't mattered for *weeks* , maybe even *months* . Rupert was flooded with both utter relief and intense frustration. *He could have been with Taggie this whole time* .

His thoughts were interrupted by Cameron, giving him a knowing smirk. She gestured with her eyes across the valley. "Go get her." With a grin, he only paused to breathe out a faint, "Yeah," before he darted out of the house, jumped into his car and sped down the muddy road to the Priory.

Rupert stood at the Priory door, knocking furiously, but with no answer. He tested the handle—it was unlocked. He went inside. He could hear noises coming from the room just off the kitchen, and he hurried there, desperate to see Taggie, offer himself to her.

When he walked through the doorway, he nearly dropped the ring box. Taggie, dressed in jeans and a jumper, was leaning on the back of the sofa, laughing down at a dark-haired, lanky figure, stretched out on the entirety of the piece of furniture, wearing a shirt and trousers that were both comically too short for him. *It was Bas* **.** *When the fuck had he come back??*

Bas noticed Rupert before Taggie did. He sat up and managed a small smile until his eye caught the small black box clutched in Rupert's right hand. All the blood drained from Bas's face, his eyes wide. Bas's eyes darted up to Rupert's, and Bas knew immediately that Rupert had ended things with Cameron. It was written all over Rupert's face, like a weight had been lifted, and he was looking at Taggie with an adoration and hunger that made Bas nauseous. Bas remembered Taggie's words earlier that morning—how she wasn't, didn't want to be with Rupert because of the "Cameron" of it all. *No longer a problem. She would be neither secret nor second choice.* Bas had never been so sorry to be right in his entire life. His hands

instinctively formed into fists at his sides, his nails digging into his palms, trying to keep himself grounded. He didn't regret coming back, not for a second, but he did regret having a front-row seat to the nightmare that had sent him fleeing in the first place. Again, the reality of the situation was worse than he could have imagined—he had to be *in the fucking house* while Rupert *proposed.*

Taggie hadn't heard Rupert approach, but she noticed Bas's change in demeanor and followed his gaze. She also noticed the box and Rupert's expression and stood rooted to the spot, her eyes wide. "Rupert?" she whispered.

Rupert began to spin the box around in his hand as he looked between the two of them, unsure of what this reunion meant for them, *for him . Fuck, I've come this far, can't lose heart now .* "Tag, Cameron and I are done. She's left Penscombe for good as of this morning, and there's something I would like to ask you." As he finished speaking, Rupert's eyes darted to Bas. His friend's face had turned green. That reaction restored some of Rupert's hope that had evaporated moments before.

Taggie took a shallow, shaky breath, holding Rupert's gaze. "Bas, can you wait here?"

Bas's eyes shifted to Taggie, taking in how she was locked in on Rupert's eyes, her shallow breathing, the flush in her cheeks, the set of her jaw, how she hadn't looked at him when she spoke. Bas felt his chest fold in on itself and a lump form in his throat. "Okay," he whispered. *This was it .*

Bas watched Taggie walk up to Rupert and take his hand, presumably taking him upstairs to her bedroom to hear him out. He sat on the sofa, his head in his hands. He started to slowly rock back and forth, focusing all of his attention on trying to breathe as he looked into the fire. He watched the clock on the wall—five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes passed. Still they didn't return. He imagined Rupert's passionate proposal, Taggie's tearful acceptance, the two of them having a celebratory snog upstairs while he sat down here, his world collapsing around his ears. Very carefully, he started to catalogue in his mind his favorite memories of Taggie, starting with that morning, all the way back through the Hunt Ball, trying to burn every detail of them into his mind. *This is all I'll have left.* He didn't want to forget a single line of her face, how it felt to have her touch him, the curve of her lips when she smiled.

Finally, twenty-two minutes later, he heard footsteps approaching. When he looked up and saw that it was Taggie, standing in the doorway alone, her face serious, he felt as if the floor had fallen out from under him. *Rupert must be waiting for her to come back upstairs after she sends me off .* She slowly approached him, her brow furrowed. Bas felt like a gaping void had opened up inside his chest. Once Taggie was within his reach, he pulled her into his lap as he began to hyperventilate. *I've been so fucking stupid. I could have had 10 more days with her before this, but I ran away like an idiot. And now it's over.* He put one arm around her waist and pressed her tightly to his chest. With the other hand, he cupped her cheek with his palm and pressed his face into the side of her head, his face in her hair. He felt a hot tear run down his cheek as he started to shake. This was the last time he would ever touch her, ever hold her like this. *This was really the end .* It hurt worse than he had ever imagined it could. He would survive it, he would eventually be okay, but not right now. Right now, he was being torn in half.

Slowly, Taggie pushed herself away from him, a gesture that felt like a shard of ice in his chest. She took his face in her hands and tilted it upwards to make him look at her. He tried to avoid her eyes, but she leaned down to put her face on the same level as his. When her soft blue eyes met his, his face fell. Much like he had for her that last night at the Bar before he left, Taggie used her thumbs to wipe his tears from his cheeks. Then she reached for his left hand. He watched as she laid it flat on her lap, running her own hand over it. Taggie pulled something from her pocket—a thin strip of dark green fabric—and tied it around the finger next to his left pinky. Then, holding his hand in both of hers, she leaned forward, again making him meet her eyes.

"Basil Baddingham, will you make an honest woman out of me?"

He knit his eyebrows together, exhaling shakily, confused, as a tentative smile bloomed on Taggie's face. He looked down at his hand, up at her face, then back down at his hand. Suddenly he realized what she was asking. He started to laugh, wiping at his face with the back of his free hand. "Do you think the register's office is open today?"

Now it was her turn to laugh. "I'd like Patrick and Caitlin to be there, so maybe we wait until the weekend."

He crushed her against him and pressed his face into her neck, finally able to breathe.

11. Epilogue

A year after Taggie tied that strip of jumper to Bas's finger, Taggie and Moriah opened a new restaurant in Cotchester, as joint owners, with a joint business loan. It was located in a formerly vacant building across the street from Bar Sinister. Elizabeth was in charge of the front-of-house, and Bas helped them draft up the business plan and orchestrate the renovation of the space. In the first two years it was open, Taggie set about making connections with local farmers and establishing the new place as a locally sourced, farm-to-table, seasonally driven concept. It was intended to not only feature a range of beautiful and creative dishes, but to also be affordable for the local people whose supplies stocked the kitchen. It allowed her to combine her love for Rutshire with her love of food. This concept was particularly appealing to idealistic and innovative culinary school graduates, some of whom came from the best culinary schools in London to work with Taggie and Moriah. As a result, the new restaurant was regularly featured in local and regional outlets and even mentioned once in the national news for their innovative, local, and grounded approach to haute cuisine. It was also an important networking connection for local farmers who found new markets for their goods in Rutshire and beyond. Joey and Marty had both gone on to culinary school and were now working in high-end kitchens in London, but had also worked in the restaurant during the first few years. It was chaos and more work and stress than she had ever experienced before, but Taggie absolutely loved it. It helped that she had the ever-competent Moriah at her side through all of it.

Bas, who was mostly keen on eating good things and curating a wine collection, remained in charge of Bar Sinister, which was now run by a different chef and front-of-house manager, both hired from Taggie and Moriah's place. For a range of reasons, Bas spent more time up in the flat above the restaurant than he did down below, popping down every so often to circulate among the tables and offer wine recommendations and chat with patrons. Glad-handing had always been his strong suit.

Rupert had been single for quite some time and in the wake of Taggie's decline of his proposal had spent more time repairing his relationship with Helen. As a result, Rupert and Helen had amended their custody agreement and he spent much more time with their two children. He found he quite enjoyed it—he had spent so much of their early childhood distracted by women, politics, and booze that he had missed so much, and he was determined to make up for it. He came to appreciate that while he had once looked to Taggie to complete him and fill his life with light, his life had already been full of good things, particularly his children. While it took some months after that stormy December day, he and Bas did eventually repair their friendship and continued to ride together regularly. In another twist of fate Rupert wouldn't have predicted, he actually came to enjoy spending time with both Bas and Taggie—it gave him sincere pleasure to see two people he deeply cared about be so happy. The first time he realized that, he had smirked wryly to himself. *Despite all my best efforts, I may become a half-decent person after all.*

As Venturer had actually won the franchise bid, Cameron still lived in Cotchester. She had taken Declan up on his offer to move into the Priory from Penscombe until she could find her

own place. The day after that storm, she had pulled her car into the Priory driveway and noted Declan standing by the front door, watching Taggie and Bas load up Taggie's things into the O'Hara vehicle to drive into Cotchester, presumably to Bas's flat. There was no sign of Rupert's car in the drive. Cameron felt like she had whiplash. She laughed to herself again. *Forget Four Men Went to Mow , we need to produce a drama based on this fucking valley.*

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7 Years (and some months) After the Storm

It was a sunny summer Saturday at the Cotchester polo pitch, and the day's match had just ended. Bas strutted off the field, closing the wooden barrier behind him. He looked sleek as ever—tight white pants, knee-high leather books, well-fitted gold jersey, gold chain necklace, sunglasses in place. The moment he was off the pitch, two small blurs rushed him. He deftly scooped them both up and continued on his way to the refreshment tent.

Taggie and Moriah heard them before they saw them—with the match over, the sounds of two small children shrieking at the top of their lungs was hard to miss.

Bas came around the corner of the tent carrying a small dark-haired boy, roughly 4 years old, and an auburn-haired girl, roughly 2 years old, each held horizontally under one of his arms, like two pieces of firewood. They were gasping for breath, tears streaming down both of their faces. Then, still holding them horizontally, he used his hands to tickle them again, causing them both to resume shrieking and giggling.

Taggie looked at him, eyebrows raised, with an amused smile, "Careful with that. Remember what happened last week."

Bas laughed and squatted down to release them onto the ground. As soon as the boy's feet hit the ground, he grabbed Bas's hand and threw himself backwards, pulling against him with all his child-strength and bodyweight. Bas wasn't prepared for it, and he was jerked forward onto his knees, barely catching himself with his other hand. His sunglasses went flying off of his face. The boy turned and looked at Taggie, very pleased with himself, his blue eyes bright and a sideways grin consuming the bottom half of his face. Taggie mostly succeeded at suppressing her smile behind her hand, making eye contact with Moriah, who made no such effort.

Still tugging on Bas's hand, the boy started to whine. "Can we GOOOO? *PLEASE?* We're *SO BORED* ."

Seeing Bas on all fours, her brown eyes determined, the auburn-haired girl filled both of her fists with Bas's gold jersey and started trying to pull herself onto his back. "Pony ride pony ride pony ride," she chanted, failing to get herself up on his back but succeeding in smearing the mud on the bottom of her shoes all over his pristine white pants. Bas laughed and put his sunglasses into his front shirt pocket. He sat down on the grass under the tent and pulled both of them in and tried to corral their squirming forms on his lap.

Taggie and Moriah both laughed, with Moriah waving her hand. "Yeah, you all go, I have everything in hand here."

Bas stood up with one child in each arm. As Taggie approached, the little girl held out her arms to her, as despite her earlier enthusiasm for a pony ride, she was going through

something of a Mommy-Velcro phase. Taggie put her on her hip, and the four of them left Moriah in the tent, both children waving violently to her over their parents' shoulders as they disappeared out of sight.

In the intervening years, Moriah had learned more than enough from Taggie to leave and open her own restaurant, which had been her original intention when she started at Bar Sinister years ago. And with Elizabeth, the two of them were a force of nature in terms of front and back of house organization, skill, and workflow. Moriah and Elizabeth had talked multiple times about moving to London to open their own place, but each time decided against it. They lived down the block from Bas and Taggie and had become very attached to their children. It had become something of a ritual for the six of them to eat dinner together on Sundays and for the two children to then sleepover with Auntie Moriah and Auntie Elizabeth. They had formed a chosen family that all of them valued immensely. Between that and the creative control, innovation, and recognition Moriah had at the new place with Taggie, Moriah no longer felt compelled to leave Cotchester. And it felt good.

On the drive back to Cotchester, the two children almost instantly fell asleep in the backseat of the car, wrung out from the sun, heat, and excitement of being at the polo match all day. Bas smiled at their slumped forms in the rearview mirror, then looked over at Taggie. He was very pleased to find her staring at him, her blue eyes bright, and a familiar flush creeping up her neck. Bas grinned at her from behind his sunglasses and stepped on the accelerator.

When they got home, as soon as the two children were tucked into bed for a belated afternoon nap, Taggie took Bas's hand and drug him to their bedroom, locking the door behind them and turning on the radio. She immediately started to pull his polo jersey up over his head. The combination of how he looked in the kit, plus the absolutely heady smell of his sweat combined with that of leather and horse had made her want to crawl out of her skin all the way home from the pitch.

"The shower here also holds two, if you—"

She pulled him down to kiss her, cutting him off, his jersey up around his shoulders. He pressed her against him, tangling his fingers in her hair. "No, I want you like this," she whispered, with a soft laugh when they parted, both breathless. Taggie slid her fingers inside the waistband of his pants, working at the button. Bas gave her a playful grin, his pants suddenly far too tight, and finished pulling the jersey over his head, throwing it across the room. "As the lady wishes."

A few hours later, the two of them were sitting on the sofa (yes, that sofa). The two children, now napped, bathed, fed, and soon headed for bed were temporarily enthralled by the television, and Bas reached over and tapped Taggie's shin. Grinning, she shifted herself so her head rested on the armrest, and she lifted her feet into his lap, and he began to massage her soles. As his hands worked, his eyes rested on the two small forms glued to the television. He loved Taggie more than anything, anyone in the world, and he hadn't thought it would be possible to love anyone, anything else that much. But he had discovered it *was* possible.

Nearly three years after Taggie tied that scrap of his scorched jumper to his finger in the Priory, the two of them were in Argentina. He had wanted her to see that part of his life, and she had suggested incorporating more of the Argentinian dishes he liked into their restaurants' and home's menus, so he had suggested they both go for a few weeks every year. She was able to meet his father and the range of other friends and connections he had there. She felt like she got to see a whole different side of him, even more carefree and happy than the Bas she knew in Cotchester. On their last night in Argentina on this third trip, as they laid sweaty and tangled up with each other in their bedsheets, she had taken his hand and placed it on her stomach and told him she was pregnant. Taggie was clearly thrilled. However, the idea scared Bas so much that it made him want to throw up. *What the fuck do I know about being a father?*

When their oldest was born, Bas spent 24 hours scared to death. They had gone to the hospital in the middle of the night when Taggie's contractions started, but were sent home to let things progress. She alternated between walking around the apartment and trying and failing to find a comfortable position in bed. Bas nervously walked beside her and fussed with the pillows around her in bed. Neither of them slept a wink. Finally, when her water broke the next afternoon and she started to feel nauseous and an intense pressure in her lower back, they went back to the hospital. Late that evening, nearly 20 hours after things had begun, Taggie finally started to progress. Given her lack of sleep and overall stress, Taggie was at the end of her rope. When the doctor and nurses told her that it was finally time to push, she laid her head back against the hospital bed and started to sob, her hair sweat-plastered to her head. She looked over at Bas, distraught, terrified, utterly exhausted. "I can't do this. I can't do this," she whispered, her voice cracking, shaking her head. He was panic-stricken, seeing her like this, but he tried to not let the feelings reach his face. He took her hand in one of his and pressed it to his lips, pressing his other palm to her hot, clammy cheek. She closed her eyes and sobbed into his hand. 'You can, Tag. You can.' He gave her hand a squeeze. She opened her eyes and gave him a weak smile and a strangled laugh. "Okay," she whispered, as she took a deep breath. "Keep telling me that." Then, squeezing his hand with a force that he thought would break all of the bones in it, she started to push.

Finally, two agonizing hours later, it was over. A wave of relief flooded over him when the tense silence of the room was pierced by an angry squalling. One of the nurses called him over to cut the cord, then laid their tiny, red, squirming son on Taggie's exposed chest, covering them both with a blanket. Bas sat next to her, his hand resting on her shoulder as he watched her count all of the baby's fingers. She started to sob again and looked over at Bas. "*We made* him," she whispered, laughing through her tears. He felt like his heart would explode.

Eventually, a nurse appeared to help Taggie to the bathroom and prepare them to leave the delivery room for the ward. Taggie turned to Bas, "Do you want to hold him?" Bas started to panic (again). He had never held a baby before and was terrified of doing something wrong, hurting him. The nurse, seeing his stricken face, arranged his arms for him with an amused chuckle, then deftly took the baby from Taggie and gave him to Bas.

Getting out of the bed and to and from the adjoining hospital bathroom was an ordeal for Taggie. The baby off of her now, her entire body started to shake, coming down from the adrenaline of the whole experience. That, plus the pain and mess of it all made shuffling to and from the bathroom and trying to both shower and use the bathroom seem positively

Herculean. When she finally finished, the nurse helped her back to the bed to pack up her things. When they were about ten feet away from the bed, the nurse stopped and nudged Taggie, pointing with a smile on her face. Bas was holding their son and was slowly and gently running his index finger along the baby's exposed hand, which had escaped the swaddling. Taggie could tell by the slight movement of Bas's shoulders that he was silently crying as he did. Slowly, she made her way over to stand next to him. He looked up at her, his cheeks wet, and let out a shallow, shaky laugh. Taggie put her arm around him and he leaned into her side. "He's perfect," she whispered, tears filling her own eyes. Bas didn't respond, but she felt him nod against her side. She tangled her fingers in his hair, and the two of them stayed like that for a moment before they made their way to the ward.

They took Fede (officially Federico, after Bas's father) home, both terrified of breaking him, and in disbelief that they were allowed to just walk out of the hospital with a real, live baby on their own reconnaissance. They slowly adjusted to being a unit of three, and both Bas and Taggie felt like neither of them slept for an entire month. However, Fede's arrival added new complications to more than their sleep schedules. Between Moriah and their highly competent kitchen staff, the daily operations of the new restaurant were running fine without her, but Taggie was restless. She needed to take time off to recover, and she did. But she was soon driving around Rutshire, meeting with farmers, walking down to Moriah's flat to plan out menus, all with Fede in tow. Finally, when she had recovered enough to theoretically go back to the kitchen, which she very much wanted to do, there was the question of what to do with the baby.

It was a Sunday night, and all of them were sitting around the kitchen table in Bas and Taggie's flat above Bar Sinister. Taggie was holding Fede and Moriah had casually asked when she would come back to the kitchen. Taggie ducked her face, smelling the baby's scalp.

"I don't know," Taggie said softly. "I don't know what to do with him." Whereas other women may be able to rely on their mothers, her mother was no use in this situation, nor was Bas's. And while they could afford it, she didn't relish the idea of hiring a nanny. Since Taggie did a lot of the interfacing with suppliers and PR for the restaurant and wasn't in the kitchen every day, she had the flexibility to take him with her. But there were plenty of days where she *did* have to be in the kitchen and it wouldn't be feasible. Before he was born, she and Bas had planned to hire someone to help, but now that he was here, she was having second thoughts about leaving him with a stranger.

Bas reached his arm around behind Taggie's chair and slowly ran his fingers back and forth across her back. "I can take him." Moriah, Elizabeth, and Taggie all snapped their heads over to look at Bas.

Leaning back in his chair, he put his feet up on a stool, and looked between the three of them, a look of mock horror on his face. "What? Don't look so shocked."

"Do you mean it?" Taggie asked with a half-smile.

"I mean, *I am* his father, and I think he's a bit young to protest. Plus, you all worked with me for long enough. You all know I don't really *do* anything useful at the Bar most of the time anyway."

Taggie and Moriah both exchanged a look and laughed. *He wasn't wrong*.

“Besides, it might be good for business if word gets out that you can come to the Bar Sinister and get an excellent wine recommendation from Rutshire’s Randiest Rake with a baby on his hip.”

So that’s what they did. For the first few months, on his days, Bas kept him in the flat upstairs and would briefly pop downstairs as needed. But as Fede got older, Bas started bringing him downstairs on his rounds. Bas, as it turned out, was correct. It was *great* for business. It amused him to no end how essentially doing nothing but walking around with a baby on his hip resulted in him being endlessly complimented for being “such a great father.” It also seemed to make the single female patrons particularly hot and bothered. When Taggie came back across the street for lunch or at the end of the day, he usually made a point to tell her the over-the-top compliments he received from women, usually standing behind her, his arms around her waist, his mouth on her ear. He found it motivated her to reach for his belt even more eagerly than usual.

One day, Moriah and Taggie had come across the street to the Bar during the lunch rush. Taggie was infinitely amused at the figure he cut—tall, dark and handsome, well-dressed and leisurely schmoozing with customers just as he always had, but now with his blue-eyed carbon copy on his hip, who also seemed to be equally naturally extroverted. Taggie instantly understood the effusive compliments and fervor of the female patrons. Imagining Bas’s suit in a heap on the floor of their bedroom, Taggie made a mental note to clear a slot in her afternoon schedule to overlap with Fede’s nap time.

Moriah’s thoughts were much less carnal: *He’s a marketing genius* . She convinced Bas to come across the street every so often, Fede in tow, to generate a similar enthusiasm at the new place. *Might as well use the incredibly low expectations of fatherhood to our advantage* , she thought.

Bas had again wanted to stress-barf when Taggie told him she was pregnant again. He still had nightmares about those last hours of labor with Fede, where he had been convinced Taggie was going to implode on that hospital bed and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Two weeks before her due date, the three of them were sitting in the flat above the Bar Sinister eating dinner. Taggie had been experiencing what she assumed was false labor for most of the day and was trying to ignore it, not having said anything to Bas. During dinner, she suddenly went to the bathroom, leaving Bas holding a very sleepy Fede who was limp against his chest. When Taggie emerged from the bathroom, her face was white, one hand on her back and the other gripping the back of a chair with white knuckles. She told Bas they needed to go to the hospital *now* . Without thinking, in a panic, Bas instantly ran out of the flat and across the street, carrying Fede into the new restaurant in the middle of the dinner rush. Seeing his face, Elizabeth, didn’t need to be told what was happening. She instantly held out her arms and took the toddler, telling Bas to go, as she and Moriah already had their spare key. When they arrived at the hospital, Bas cranked their car sideways in front of the emergency room entrance and came around to the passenger-side door. Frantic, he picked Taggie up from the passenger seat and carried her inside, his eyes wild, as another contraction doubled her over in his arms. Their daughter Maria was born twenty minutes later, before the doctor could arrive.

Later that year, they moved out of the Bar Sinister flat, to a rowhouse down the block from Moriah and Elizabeth, kitty-corner from the new restaurant. The flat above the Bar slowly

became his office, with the guest room functioning as a playroom. Every time he went rooting through all the child paraphernalia in the guest closet, Bas chuckled to himself thinking about the cast-off women's clothing that used to fill it.

Bas was very entertained to note that the public went even more gaga for him walking around the Bar with a little girl on his hip. On slow days, when he had the children, he would often take both of them with him to Penscombe, and he and Rupert would work with Fede, who was very keen to start riding, and had become very attached to Tabitha's old pony. Despite his initial terror at the idea, Bas found that fatherhood suited him quite well.

"Are you ready to be outnumbered?" Taggie joked, pulling Bas out of his reverie.

He moved one hand over to cover hers, which rested on her swollen stomach. He looked down at the floor, where their two oldest were now fighting over the same toy, both red-faced and on the verge of tears, the television long forgotten.

His head was resting against the back of the sofa, and he rolled it over to look at her. He lifted his hand to her face, tracing his thumb along her cheekbone, as she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

"Absolutely not," he whispered, a crooked grin on his face, an eyebrow raised.

Taggie laughed into his hand. "Me neither."

Neither of them said it out loud, but they both simultaneously thought, *Thank God we scheduled that vasectomy.*

Bas thought back to the week after Maria was born. He was out in a shop in Cotchester, a sleep-deprived husk of a person, dark circles under his eyes, his mind foggy, blankly staring at the shelves, desperately trying to remember what he had come there to buy. He heard a female voice behind him call his name. He turned and was surprised to see it was his old fling Felicity who had stood him up for the Hunt Ball the night he had taken Taggie. In the course of their polite small talk, she apologized to him for standing him up that night. She was taken aback when Bas grabbed her by the shoulders, started laughing, and thanked her profusely. "I know this sounds terrible, but you standing me up that night was the best thing that ever happened to me."

The memory bringing a smile to his face, he reached forward and settled both squabbling children on the sofa, one on each side of him. Taggie, watching from the end of the sofa, thought back to that night in the Priory kitchen, after Rupert kissed her and left with Cameron, remembering how Bas had come back to the kitchen to check on her in the midst of all the other chaos—how it was such a small kindness that felt so big, so rare to her. *Because it had been rare for me to receive that type of kindness and care.* She reached around Maria's petite frame to grab his hand again, a warmth spreading through her chest as he squeezed it and turned to wink at her. She smiled back at him, thinking, *It's not rare anymore.*

The End.